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Frontier Stories

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

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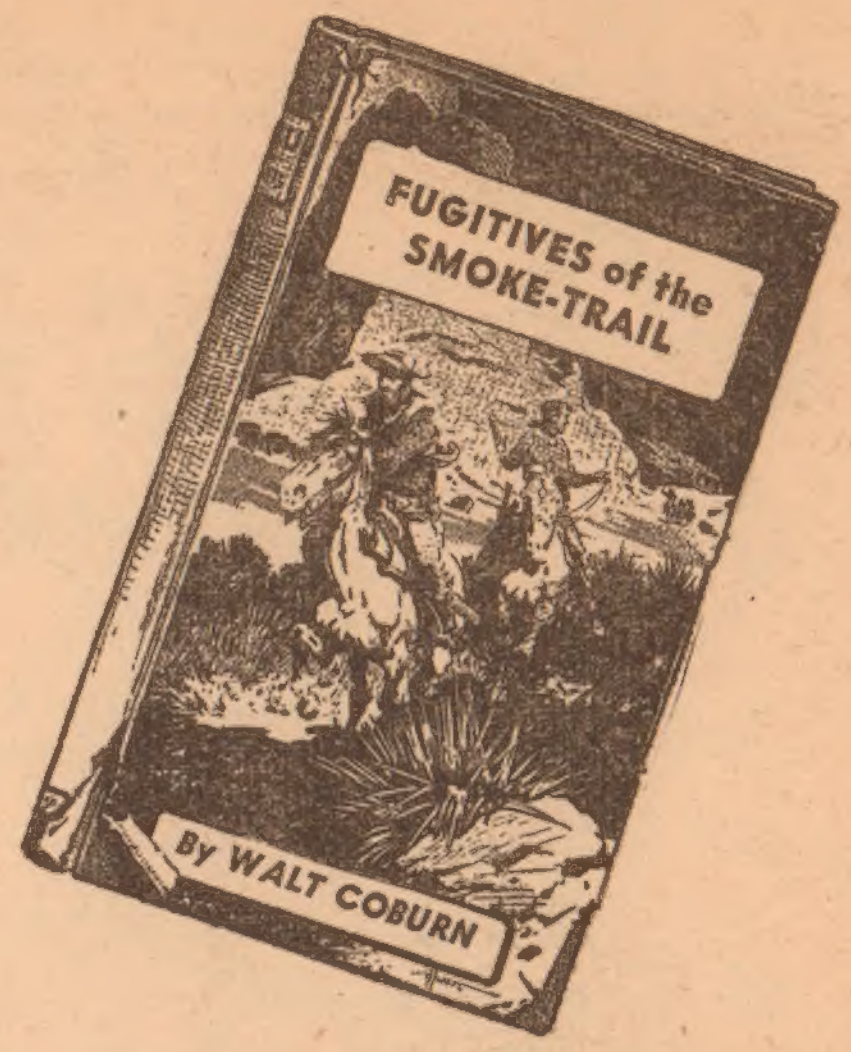

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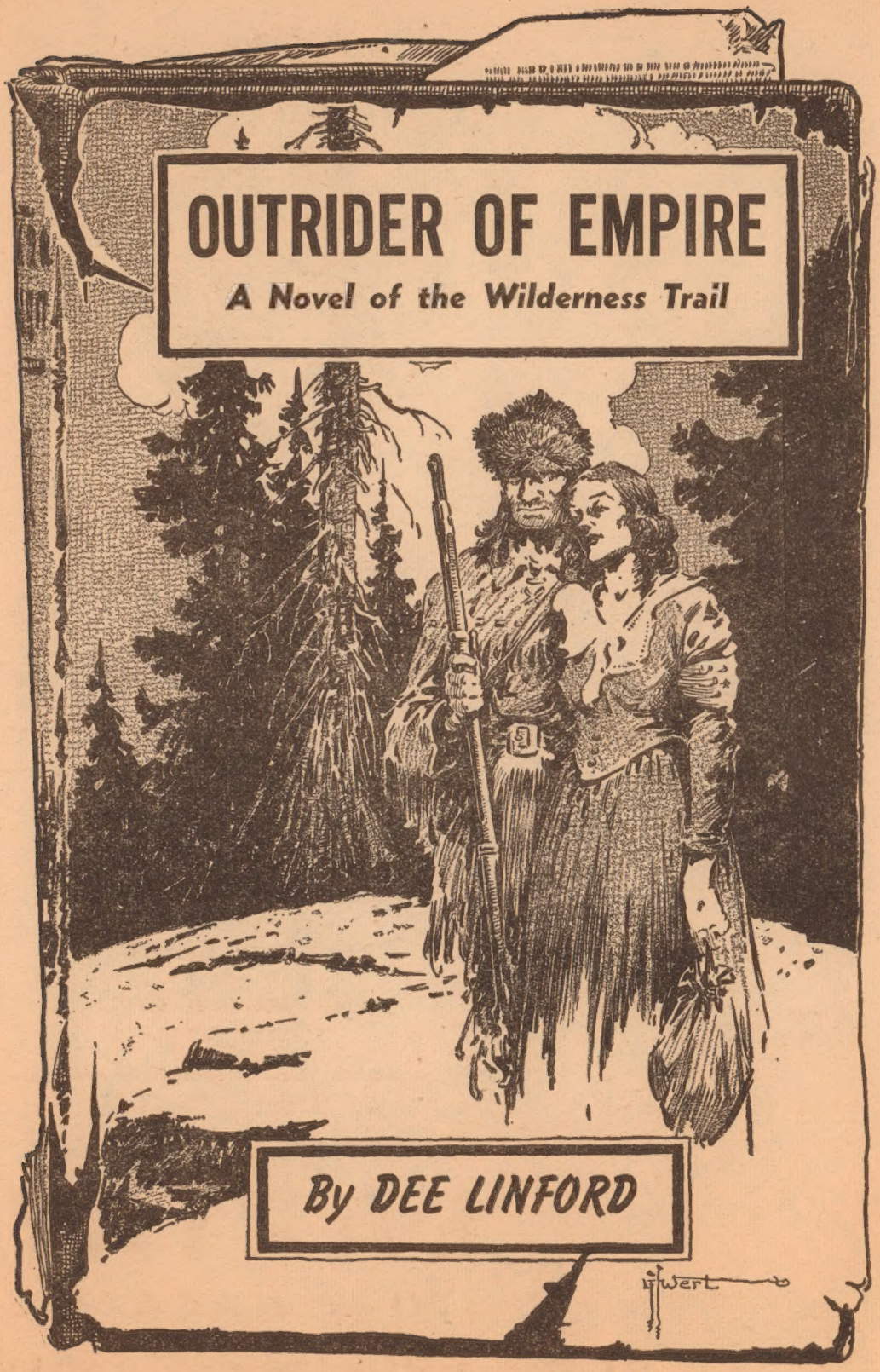
OUTRIDER OF EMPIRE
A Novel of the Wilderness Trail
By DEE LINFORD
WERT

"Take the gun an' keep them devils jumpin' while I put this ship down the crick."

OUTRIDER OF EMPIRE

By DEE LINFORD

Shaggy Kip McKenzie was free at last from the Great Company's iron grip—free to die. Amid a thousand miles of white-running water, of tree-columned wilderness, every man, Red or White, itched for the deserter's bounty-posted scalp-lock.

ANXIOUS and ill-at-ease, Kip McKenzie stood before the bourgeois in the bourgeois's house at Fort Provence. Standing flat in his deerskin moccasins, McKenzie brushed the six-and-a-half-foot ceiling with the top of his beaver-skin cap, and his hair fell down like tawny mane to his wide, buckskin-girt shoulders. His eyes, matching his hair in color, were wide in inquiry; and his flat, supple muscles were tense with an undefined foreboding.

The bourgeois, seated behind his big trader's table, was small of stature and thin of face. His Christian name was Simon Snood, but Christian names were almost unknown in the aristocratic system of the Hudson's Bay Company. Familiarity between ranking men and their subordinates was unheard of, and all company traders in charge of a post had to be addressed as "Mister Bourgeois," or *M'sieu le Bourgeois,* as the French *voyageurs* made it.

This caste system was in rigid effect, even at Fort Provence, the fur company's little outpost on the upper Columbia. But because of the bourgeois's wide, flat temples, his pointed nose and chin, and the crafty, alert manner about him, he was known better among the company men as "the Fox."

The tawny-eyed giant, however, had no eye for the trader himself. He was staring at the paper the bourgeois had handed him, and his voice when he spoke was uncertain, almost apologetic.

"I'm s-sorry, sir," he said, stammering a bit. "But I haven't got any money. I'm afraid I can't pay what I've overdrawn at the commissary before I leave. But I'll send the money as soon as I get back to the States."

The bourgeois looked up, faintly annoyed. "Company policy forbids discharging employees who are financially indebted to the company," he said in crisp, concise English.

McKenzie's eyes came up to meet the bourgeois's unfeeling gaze, and a sort of supplication softened his rugged features. "Bu-but my time is up sir. I've served five years, like the contract said, and I'm free now to go. I can get the money I owe the company as soon as I get back to my home. I'll send it up to the nearest Hudson's Bay post."

The bourgeois had all the stern decorum of a man who enforces a system rigidly—when it doesn't affect himself. "The company, for the last time, discharges no employee who owes the commissary. I'm sorry, McKenzie, but you're over-drawn. And there is nothing I can do."

The blond giant shrugged. "Isn't there anything *I* can do?"

"One thing. You can re-enlist with the company."

Kip McKenzie started, and his face clouded. "And spend another year here?"

The bourgeois was coldly efficient. "Five years is the term of enlistment with the Hudson's Bay."

Anger kindled in the young woodsman's face. Anger and a new anxiety. But he controlled his voice. "Twenty dollars a year isn't a very big wage, Mister Bourgeois. Not when a man has got to provide his own clothes and possibles out of it—at Injun prices. I've come through the five-year period I've worked here owin' you thirty dollars. Five years more, and I'll owe you sixty dollars. Five more than that, and I'll owe you—why, I'll be here all my life!"

The bourgeois raised his thin shoulders and let them fall. "I did not write the company policy. All I can do is enforce it."

McKenzie stood silent, fighting the anger and helpless despair that gnawed at him inside. He bit back the hot words that were on his tongue and said a little wistfully, "I've learned a lot in the last five years, Mister Bourgeois. I could qualify as a *voyageur*. I can handle a boat now as good as any of them Frenchmen you've got up here. With their pay, I could—why I could square my debt and have some over in five years!"

The towering young woodsman's hopes rose with his voice. They were shattered by the shake of the bourgeois's head.

"We've got more *voyageurs* than we can use now. It's laborers around the post we need. You'll stay in your present capacity, McKenzie."

The young giant stared another moment in silence; then he gave himself over to the rage that welled up inside him. "Your company policy is a fine word for slavery, Mister Bourgeois," he said savagely. "I'm an American citizen, and I'll be slave to no damned English. A man would think you Lobsterbacks would learn sometime. You tried this kind of business with our seamen ten years ago, and the Yanks whaled the red off your backs for it. We did it once, and we'll do it again."

THE post trader's annoyance became more manifest. "Your precious United States is three thousand miles from Oregon," he snapped. "This is a crown colony, and we'll not be askin' your country how to run it. Now get outside, and to work."

Kip McKenzie moved involuntarily toward the diminutive trader. "Crown colony be damned. England has got no claim to Oregon. You'll see the day when the United States stretches from Puget Sound to Noo York. All one big country. You'll see Yanks come to Oregon so fast you an' your kind will be pushed into the sea—with the rest of the sharks."

The bourgeois was on his feet now, and his eyes were reduced to one green gleam. "Stand back, pig-eater," he commanded, haughty and unflinching, "Or I'll see the hide flogged off your Yankee back."

Five years under a dictatorship such as ruled every Hudson's Bay fur post west of the Great Lakes had its effect on a man and rage and all Kip McKenzie hadn't considered actually laying hands on the bourgeois. That would have been like laying hands on George the Third himself.

But the trader's manner, and the stinging scorn of his words, pulled something loose inside the powerful young body. Kip McKenzie forgot the presence of the partisan behind him—forgot everything except the face in front of him. A fury arose inside him and he flung himself forward as the bourgeois backed away.

But there was a movement behind, and something collided with terrific force against the back of his head. Fire shapes danced before his eyes—fire shapes that turned black and engulfed him.

The next thing Kip McKenzie remembered seeing was the bearded face of Jules Charbonneau, the partisan or man in charge of the Hudson's Bay's actual trapping operations in the Fort Provence area. While the bourgeois directed trading and all affairs of the post itself, the partisan's word was law in the field. Together, the two formed a sort of supreme command from which there was no appeal in all the inland empire of the Hudson's Bay.

As Simon Snood was known as "the Fox" in the northwest woods, Jules Charbonneau was known as "the Bear." And the name was equally descriptive. A barrel-chested French-Canadian with thick, gangling arms, a bull neck, and blue-black hair and beard, the partisan stood not so high as Kip McKenzie, but he would outweigh the youth by fifty pounds.

Legends that told of the "Bear's" incredible strength were manifold in the Oregon woods. It was related, for instance, that the partisan had fallen through the snow one day into a cave where a she-grizzly was in hibernation with her two new-born cubs. His gun was lost in the fall, and the cave was black as a northern winter night. Armed only with a long knife, Charbonneau had faced the aroused grizzly. And he had emerged victorious. But it was said also in this connection that Charbonneau's glossy beard was grown to conceal a face that had been terribly mangled by the grizzly's claws. And it was said, further, that the partisan had been since as vicious as the bear he had killed. It was known that no man had crossed his will and lived.

These things were in Kip McKenzie's mind as he looked into the Bear's sharp brown eyes, and heard him speaking in the jumble of bad French and worse English, that is the brogue of the French-Canadian.

"A peeg-eater, by Gar, he don't lay hands on the bourgeois. The Americain, he get to work or Jules he skin heem an' zell the hide. Yah."

The rifle with which the partisan had clubbed McKenzie to the floor was still in his hand, pointing at the blond giant's chest. Painfully, Kip got to his feet and stumbled out the door.

THERE was great activity at Fort Provence that morning. The wide gate in the log-bastioned stockade stood open, and a dozen flat-bottomed mackinaw boats were drawn up where the big lazy Columbia made a wide turn around the wooded fort promontory. Two scores of long-haired, thick-armed men worked at loading the boats with huge, square fur packs from the post peltry.

The annual shipment to the Pacific was on. In a week, the last of the winter's catch and trade at Fort Provence would be on its way down to the company ships anchored at the Columbia's Delta in the Pacific. Work at Provence would then be over until cold weather again made the furs prime.

That is, work would be over for all but the indentured workers—the *manguers du lard* or "pig-eaters," as the haughty *voyageurs* called them. For the pig-eaters, work never ceased. The bourgeois saw to that.

But Kip McKenzie was unaware of this activity as he emerged from the bourgeois's house. He was dazed and sick at the bottom of his stomach, and he wandered to the peltry to lean against the blood-stained wall. The peltry was shaded and cool, but it was hot and stifling to Kip, and the heavy air pressed in to smother him. For this was the day for which he

had waited for five years—the day when he would be free to ride a mackinaw boat down to the ocean and take a company ship for home.

Thoughts of this eventual return to civilization and freedom were all that had kept him sane during his enforced service at Fort Provence. Now it would be at least five years more, with no actual hope of escape then. And desertion from the Hudson's Bay was considered suicide, because the company was more relentless than any army in tracking down and executing its deserters. Anyhow, the only white men in the Oregon country were Hudson's Bay men. The only Indians were company Indians. There was no place for a deserter to go.

Bitterly, McKenzie recalled that it was a woman who had lured him into the trap that had held him a prisoner at hard work those years—a woman with dark hair and luminous eyes and a voice like distant, liquid music. Kip was eighteen then, and the only girls he knew were his sisters. This beautiful, mysterious woman had smiled at him on the streets of his native St. Louis, and he had followed her to a dark, luxurious manor on a hill overlooking the town. She had smiled at him often after that. And he was her slave.

Came the night when she invited him to call on her at the mysterious mansion, and they had sipped cool juleps in her garden. It was moonlight, and she had met his eyes and accepted his kiss. Vividly he recalled the enchantment of the moment, and the arrival of her "friends"—dark, sharp-eyed men with tales of marvelous adventure and untold riches that awaited the white man in the vast wild country that Lewis and Clark had so lately discovered.

Less clearly, he recalled signing a harmless-looking contract to work with these men, a contract which he found next day bound him almost in servitude to the Hudson's Bay. In despair, he had called at the mystery manor to be met by a dark-skinned doorman who said that no lady lived there and he had best be gone.

The rest of it was indelibly stamped on his whole mental consciousness: the long trip up the Missouri in the company keel boat, the grounding of the boat below the Mandan Villages, and the trip overland to the western watershed of the continent to serve as a "pig-eater" at Provence. Pig-eaters were treated as beasts of burden in the company system, and Kip had counted the days and hours until his period of enlistment would be over. But he understood now why the other indentured workers stayed on at the fort, period after period—silent, bitter men who no longer spoke, not even among themselves. He would soon be one with them. For his hope, too, was gone.

A sudden, cutting pain bit into his face, and a sharp, high-pitched voice shrieked in his ear, "To work, *manguer du lard!* Ze Americains are ze mos' lazee dogs. Ze boats, zey mus' be loaded. *Allons,* my fine eater of peeg!"

STILL dazed from the blow on his head in the bourgeois's house, Kip turned to face Francois, a small, intense *voyageur,* one of the class of river boatmen whose skill gave them great social and economic prestige in the Hudson's Bay caste system, a system which had endured ever since the company was founded by Frenchmen for the English crown more than a century earlier. The *voyageurs* were the indentured workers' immediate superiors, and were therefore chief among their oppressors.

But Francois was more than a tyrannic overseer to Kip McKenzie. Francois was one of the mysterious lady's "friends" who had called at the manor that night five years before. Francois had furnished the contract that Kip had signed that night.

The *voyageur,* outraged now by the American's delay, swung the whip in his hand again. Its leaded strands cut into McKenzie's face for the second time in a minute. Blood from the cuts ran down into the American's eyes, and, goaded to action by the pain, he charged his tormentor. Ignoring the whip which cut into his face again and again, he seized the boatman and raised him high above his head. Then, without real thought of killing him, he brought the squirming, squealing form crashing down upon the ground.

Kip McKenzie came from big family stock, and he had entered the woods while still a gangling, loose-jointed youth of eighteen. The years of hard work and rigorous living in the woods had filled out the loose, tall frame, giving it a strength of

which even Kip was not aware. And now his latent strength and his blind rage conspired against him. For Francois struck the ground, head-first, and the force of his fall crushed his small-boned body. His narrow shoulders were driven halfway down his spine and his head lay loosely to one side on a broken neck.

Kip McKenzie stood motionless over the man he had killed. Then a panic came over him. Resisting a superior was punished by the company with death. And he had killed a *voyageur*.

His alarm cleared his brain, and for the first time since entering the bourgeois's house, Kip could think with a cold, seeing mind. Stooping over, he picked up the dead *voyageur's* long-barreled gun and powder horn and bullet pouch. He swung the pouch and horn across one shoulder and started for the open stockade gate.

The bourgeois appeared in the doorway of his house with a rifle, and McKenzie leveled the old piece in his hand, praying that it might be loaded and primed. It was. It exploded in his hand with a deafening detonation. The bourgeois stumbled back to fall inside his house, his face a red patchwork of blood.

A man blocked the path ahead, and McKenzie clubbed him to the ground with the stock of the empty muzzle-loader. Then he was through the stockade gate and to the log river pier. A second *voyageur* raised a bell-mouthed pistol to shoot him, but a squaw-haired pig-eater jostled the Frenchman and spoiled his aim. The ball whistled over McKenzie's head, and the *voyageur* fled as the giant swung toward him.

A dugout cottonwood canoe lay grounded under the pier. McKenzie threw his rifle into the slender craft, pushed it into the current, and climbed in. He glanced upward as the canoe left the shelter of the log structure, and saw that the indentured workers had grouped themselves about the river wharf in such a way as to shield him from the fire of the sentinels in the near corner blockhouse. He bent himself to the paddle, and when shots rang out behind him, he was out of range.

He let the dugout drift while he recharged his gun, then he paddled with renewed effort. But boats were following now, and he knew he could not paddle against the *voyageurs*... Not when they paddled two in a boat and he was alone. Anyhow, he couldn't go much farther down the river. There was a big cataract around the bend ahead, and already he could hear its booming above the shouting behind him.

Sweeping his canoe around the bend, he crowded it against the southern bank, dropped his paddle and beaverskin cap to the bottom of the boat and stood erect. An overhanging thicket came close, and he grabbed it, swinging himself ashore without upsetting the long craft in the water. The gun was clutched in his free hand.

For the smaller part of a second, he watched the boat, caught now by the quickening current and pulled toward the brink of the roaring fall. The cap, he hoped, would come to the surface with the canoe down below. It would, he hoped, lead the *voyageurs* to believe that he had gone over with the boat.

A swift-flowing mountain creek disgorged itself in the sluggish river not three feet from where the fugitive stood—a lean, hurried stream that fell rapidly from the hooded peaks that broke the horizon to the south. McKenzie reached the stream in one leap and walked up its hard-gravel course toward the distant Cour d' Alene Mountains.

The dense golden willow thicket swallowed him, but he stayed with the water path. The *voyageurs* would soon decide that he hadn't gone over the fall. And the Blackfeet trackers would be out within the hour.

II

KIP McKENZIE'S first impulse was to put as much distance as possible between himself and Fort Provence. Throughout the remainder of the day and throughout the night he walked without rest, holding himself to a steady, long mile-eating stride that took him across the Cour d' Alene foothills into the deep, hidden canyons of that rugged range. No deserter had ever yet escaped Fort Provence. But Kip had a long start and a strong body. And, he resolved grimly, he would not be retaken, alive.

At dawn of the second day out, he shot a pine grouse and ate the flesh, raw, not

daring to risk a fire. There was not only danger of pursuit from the fort. He was in the country of the dread Blackfeet, those inveterate enemies of the Yankees ever since Captain William Clark had killed one of their chiefs for stealing horses from the Lewis and Clark surveying party. The Otter Hat, Blackfoot chief in the Fort Provence area, would kill him then for two reasons: because he was an American, and because of the reward the Hudson's Bay Company offered for the capture of deserters. The Otter Hat was a "company Indian."

It was not until then that Kip McKenzie attempted to plan ahead. He hadn't had much time before. Now, unless he could avoid the Indians and find a way out of the wilderness soon, he would die a worse death than would have been meted out back at Provence. For there were only thirteen rifle balls in his pouch, and only enough powder for thirteen charges in his horn. He could cut the soft lead slugs in half with his knife and use halfpowder charges for game hunting. But even twenty-six charges weren't many for a man afoot in enemy country, two thousand miles from civilization.

During the years Kip had spent at Fort Provence, he had never been allowed out of earshot of the fort alone. So he had not had much chance for personal exploration. And the company trappers who came in once in a while to get supplies despised the pig-eaters as heartily as did the *voyageurs.* So he had learned little from these. But from the free trappers, who regarded a white man as white regardless of his circumstances, he had picked up frugal bits of information about the surrounding country.

"Even the birds has to use rough-locks to git around in the Cour d' Alenes," one bearded denizen of the woods had told him. "But onct ye git beyon' 'em, ye got country flat as the Columbia, if ye go the right way."

Also, from these trappers, McKenzie had heard vague talk of American traders and trappers somewhere along the headwaters of the Columbia's southern tributaries—the Snake or Mad River, and the Salmon. Just where these Americans were or how they got there, no one seemed to know. Because neither Mad River nor the Salmon was considered navigable, even by the *voyageurs,* the most skilled boatsmen in the West.

"La Maudite Riviere Enragee!" these boaters whispered in awe when the Snake was mentioned, "The accursed mad river." Then would follow tales of boats and lives and fortunes in fur lost on that treacherous, smooth-surfaced stream with its insidious undertow and its sudden, white-capped rapids and falls.

Talk of the Americans to the south had also come from the partisan and the *voyageurs.* All agreed that the Yanks were in the south country, and that they should be killed wherever encountered. But none of them seemed to have any concrete information concerning these shadowy men of mystery.

Fact or fiction, however, Kip McKenzie had nothing better to do than to try to find them. He knew there were no Americans in the northwest country, and the bare chance that the legendary men might be further south made it worth his while to look for them. Anyhow, Kip McKenzie had no other place to go.

TRAVELING cautiously through the country of the Blackfeet, he made his way through the frowning purple canyons of the Cour d' Alenes, onto the wooded foothills of the other watershed. One day he paused by a large anthill and dug into it with his knife to check his bearings. For his father had taught him long before that these wise and busy creatures lay their eggs on the south side of the colony, to take advantage of the sun's warmth in incubation. From these bearings, he learned he was traveling more east than south—toward the headwaters of the Missouri. This direction, he knew, would take him to American trading areas. But he never could hope to reach the headwaters of that river alive.

Thereafter, then, he traveled at night, guided by the stars, holding a steady due south course. And night traveling best suited once he emerged on the flat prairies and valleys south of the Cour d' Alenes, since there was no cover to conceal him from the scouts of the Indian parties that infested the region.

On the twenty-sixth day out from Fort Provence, the day on which Kip McKen-

zie used his last rifle charge to bag a mule deer, he entered another range of mountains, lower and more heavily wooded than the Cour d' Alenes. He ate long of the deer, and took the hindquarters with him. But the meat spoiled the second day in the sun.

However, he came then upon a stream that displayed signs of being trapped. And this much he had learned about trapping at Fort Provence: Look for the trapper of any stream where the stream empties into a larger one.

For five foodless days he followed the stream, and each day the trail on the bank became a little wider, a little more worn. He became faint, then weak, as the days dragged on. But his hopes kept him going. The trail wasn't just an Indian game trail. It had to lead somewhere.

Early on his sixth day with nothing to eat but roots, he stumbled gaunt and exhausted into a little clearing in the sweet-smelling pines. A huddled sod-roofed cabin stood there on the banks of a mighty river that roared down from the east. A sign said, "Beaver Dick Dryden, Trader." And a tiny American flag was nailed above the door!

Kip McKenzie would have cheered if he could. He couldn't. But he broke into a weaving dog-trot toward the cabin, his voice hoarse in his throat.

He became aware, as he ran, of a sort of corral in the pines behind the cabin. In it were forty or fifty horses. He pondered the presence of horses at so far-away place as this. There were no horses at Fort Provence. Then his hopes soared high. Maybe the government at Washington had awakened at last. Maybe they had sent the cavalry at last to kick the British out of Oregon. Maybe the cavalry was here at this little post, and he could guide them to Fort Provence, then down the river to the delta on the ocean, after they had levelled the hateful post on the upper river.

He was to the cabin door then. It opened under his hand, and he was inside. He thought at first that the darkness of his eyes was only the darkness of the room. But it became thicker, and he could see nothing but shadows around him. Then something like the wind, only softer, seemed to pick him up and bear him up and over the earth. And it was funny too, because it seemed at the same time he was falling.

HE woke up on a soft, comfortable built-in bunk—the first regular white man's bunk he had enjoyed for five years. For a while, he was content to lie still, staring at the ceiling, just resting. Then returning memory raised questions in his mind, pressing questions and important. He raised himself to one elbow to look around. But a firm hand eased him back to the bearskin robes that covered him.

"Jus' take it easy, son," a drawling Yankee voice advised. "You're right with Beaver Dick Dryden, an' no cause for fuss. You come here in purty bad shape, an' you're nothin' I'd be braggin' on yet. But you've rested some, las' night an' today, an' it'll make a difference to you to git some o' this moose broth into you. Nothin' like moose broth for a man's that starved. Hummph. You got a carcass like a moose yourself."

It took a while for McKenzie to make out the face of the man who was speaking, but gradually the gray blur before his eyes condensed into a rather small, mild-mannered man in New England homespun clothes. The man's eyes were a light, washed blue, and as kindly as his face.

"Moose broth is what does 'er. Nothin' else like it. You jus' lay still till you feel a little spryer. That's right. No, don't try to talk. Time a-plenty for that. Time a-plenty. Jus' drink this. Tha's the way. Jus' drink 'er down."

The broth was hot and invigorating, and as the starved youth lay quiet, allowing himself to be fed, his eyes wandered about the room. He seemed to be in a sort of store room and living quarters combined. He saw a door, and guessed that it opened into the room where trading was done. Great heaps of highly-colored three-point blankets were stacked about him, together with other familiar articles of trade; kegs of gun powder and shot, innumerable bolts of scarlet and green cloth, heaps of iron kettles, axes, sugar and coffee sacks, steel beaver traps, open cases of cheap glass beads and other trinkets, kegs of uncut tobacco, and even a few new guns and knives.

The trader must do quite a business, he reflected. And he wondered how Dryden had transported his big stock so far. For the river he remembered seeing outside would have to be the Mad River or Snake. And the Snake wasn't navigable. Anyhow, the Yankees could have no ships at the mouth of the Columbia. Not since Astor's ship, The Tonquin, had been blown up to save its cargo from the English-incited Indians.

The reclining woodsman, still accepting the thin hot broth, started a bit to see suddenly there was another man in the room; a gaunt, dark man with bird-of-prey features and little sharp eyes. He was dressed in an imported coonskin cap, a long embroidered deerskin hunting shirt that reached below his knees, and white buckskin leggins and moccasins. He sat in the shadows near the room's only window, and his sharp eagle eyes were intent on Kip McKenzie.

Something turned over in the back of Kip's mind as he looked at the man. He had seen him before somewhere. But he couldn't think where.

Beaver Dick noticed his patient start, and he said half apologetically, "Oh yeah. I'd forgot. The gent over on the chair is Sam Loingren, a free Yank trapper. He's just come into this country. Ain't been here so long myself."

Kip mumbled his own name, and tried to think. But he couldn't get his eyes off the sharp-faced man near the window. He seemed almightly prosperous, to Kip, for a free trapper. But then, the woodsman reflected, maybe the free-trapping Yanks did better down here than the free trappers in the Hudson's Bay region. His distrust for the man grew on him, however, as he looked at him, distrust that ripened into unreasonable dislike and distrust. He couldn't help his feeling.

The door that led into the other room opened then, and someone came in. "This here is my boy, Pat," Dryden offered. "Him an' me run the place."

McKenzie saw a slight-built youth with a smooth chin and long, slender hands. He guessed that Pat wasn't much more than twelve or thirteen, yet the face had a look that was somehow much older. And that face, under the head bandana that hid the hair, was finely moulded but unkempt, reflecting however all the kindness that marked the parent's features.

"How de do," Pat Dryden said shyly, in a voice that somehow pleased Kip McKenzie. Kip would have replied, but Beaver Dick interfered with the cup of broth.

IT was several hours later that McKenzie really ate. Dryden let him get up, and he joined the others at a table that was set well with moose steaks, sourdough, and searing hot traders' coffee—a drink which had no peer west of the Missouri and which was duly appreciated by Kip McKenzie who had tasted no real-to-God coffee since leaving the States.

"Where's the cavalry?" Kip asked, attacking his first cooked meat in more than a month.

"Cavalry—?"

"Yeah. Ain't it cavalry? All the horses outside?"

The trader chuckled. "That's my pack string."

"Pack string?" Kip's jaw fell. "Mean to tell me you packed all this stuff overland from St. Louis?"

The trader smiled again. "How else? The Snake ain't fit for a boat. Anyhow, it's a lot cheaper to go overland than to ship clean around the Cape, then boat the stuff back upstream."

"But horses attract Injuns like sugar draws flies," McKenzie objected. "Don't they plunder your trains?"

"Don't take as many men to guard a pack train as to sail a ship, an' it cuts the time in a fifth," the trader pointed out. "We been doin' packin' down this way ever sinct Maj'r Ashely tried it out in twenty-two. 'Course, the Maj'r didn't come this far north. But no reason why I couldn't."

Kip McKenzie was struck with the simplicity of the scheme. And he wondered why the Hudson's Bay hadn't thought of it long before now. But, "I'll be switched," was all he said. Then he became aware that the other men at the table were studying him intently, almost suspiciously.

"You mus' be from up north," Dryden said shortly. It was almost an accusation.

"That's right," Kip admitted. "Hudson's Bay."

All breathing seemed to stop around the

table, and the three Americans stared at Kip, their eyes inquiring and hostile. So he hastened to recount briefly his experiences of the last five years: of his encounter with the strange, beautiful woman, of her betrayal, and of his enforced service at Fort Provence, his recent escape.

His voice was bitter when he finished. "An' next to the British an' Blackfeet, I'd like to rid the world o' women. That was one thing I could like about Fort Provence. There wasn't any skirts around to get a man in bad. Matter of fact, I'd stay in this country if I could, just to keep away from 'em."

Dryden laughed shortly, and said, "Man ain't troubled much by women out here, 'less it's 'cause they're so scarce." Then the twinkle died in his blue eyes, and he said, more seriously, "I'd heard the Hudson's Bay got their common labor that way. Trouble is, they're smart enough in doin' it that a man can't do anything about it. Looks legal on the books. Best way to deal with 'em I guess is with gunpowder."

Kip nodded. But he was silent. For he was noting how the electricity had gone out of the air with his explanation of his connection with the Hudson's Bay. Only the free trapper continued to stare at him, his eyes veiled and contemplative. McKenzie considered the man for a moment, then forgot him. For Beaver Dick Dryden was making him a proposition.

"You sayin' you would as soon stay in the country to keep away from women, I could use another man here. I could pay you something to sort of make it worth your while. And you could help take the pack outfit east with my furs in the spring and mebbe load traders' goods back."

Kip felt strong and well-fed and contented. "You've hired yourself a man, Mister Dryden," he said.

"Call me Beaver Dick," the man requested.

III

McKENZIE helped Pat Dryden water the horses at the river that evening, and together they cut tall swamp grass along the back to feed the animals. McKenzie had never known a chap like Pat, and he was strangely attracted to the thin youth. So young and inexperienced in most ways, Pat would listen gravely to McKenzie's adventures, then drop a single word that would impress the larger, older youth with its wiseness.

"A big struggle for this country is coming," Pat opined once during a lull in McKenzie's story of himself.

"Might be a war," Kip said hopefully, swinging the sickle in his hand viciously with the thought that it might be a broadsword aimed at a Lobsterback's neck.

Pat Dryden pulled his lithe, slim back erect and gazed out over the mountains, purple now with evening. "Maybe," he said after a silence so long that Kip had almost forgotten what they were talking about. "But it won't be till the settlers come."

"Settlers?"

"Yep. Only Indians fight real wars over hunting and trapping grounds. White trappers fight a little among themselves. But armies never come until there are settlers and plows and homes to fight for."

"Settlers!" Kip McKenzie grimaced. "Might as well give it to the English as to the settlers. Won't be no fur industry if the farmers come an' plow up the meadows an' dam off the cricks."

"Settlers are coming," Pat Dryden said positively, gazing out into the gathering dusk of night, as though seeing a vision. "They've got to come. Settlers with wagons an' plows an' cows an' kids. They're what makes a country. What we traders an' trappers do isn't important, except that we make the country ready for them. And if we don't do that, then we don't do anything important."

Kip McKenzie gazed at the strange youth beside him, and he didn't understand. "Settlers ruin the bizness," he said doggedly.

Pat Dryden continued to stare at his vision. "The business will be ruined before the settlers come. The fun can't last forever, not the way they're bein' taken. And I'm glad. Glad, 'cause trappers an' traders have got to have a country a wilderness, with Indians and wild things in it, or it's not any good to them. And when this country is all trapped out, there won't be anything here, not unless the settlers

come. And they will. They'll come with their women and make a fine country out of this when it's no good to anyone else, not even to the Indians."

McKenzie spat in distaste. "Women! About the time the settlers would have the country won, the women would poison 'em, an' give the land back to the British."

Pat looked at him slowly, and his round face became tense with thought. "Maybe all women aren't like the one you knew," he suggested softly.

McKenzie's face darkened. "Women are all mopsies," he said dogmatically. "Maybe they can't help it. Maybe it's just the way they are. But that don't make much difference. Rattlesnakes can't help bein' poison either, but they're just as poison as if they meant to be."

Pat's face flushed, and something like anger darkened his eyes. "I don't know about your mother," he said with a sharpness that surprised Kip. "But nobody is callin' my mother a mopsy or a snake either."

"I wasn't," Kip was quick to disclaim. "Mothers, mine an' yours, anyhow, are different."

The anger left Pat's face, and he smiled a wise, superior smile that Kip didn't like. "Sure they are. An' so is everybody else's mother. I guess women are like British and Blackfeet, huh? There's good ones, and bad ones. But they'll come to this country and make it a fit place to live in."

KIP was silent. But his opinion of womankind hadn't changed. Neither did he agree with Pat about the country. He wanted it to be United States. But he wanted it to stay like it was, wild and free. Maybe, though, Pat had a point. Maybe it couldn't stay like it was and be a part of the United States. But he didn't see why.

He glanced sidelong at his friend as they returned to the cabin in the moonlight, and he thought secretly what a funny guy he was.

Beaver Dick Dryden and the trapper, Sam Loingren, were talking, seriously, when Kip and Pat entered the trading room. And they stopped abruptly when the youths entered.

One thought had disturbed McKenzie all the long afternoon, a thought that grew naturally out of his comparison of the only two trading posts he knew. Fort Provence was strongly fortified against possible attack or even siege. It was really a fort. This post was just a cabin in the pines.

And now, as he loitered about the store room, he voiced his thought to the others present. "Seems like this place would be mighty easy to attack, Beaver Dick. Haven't you had any trouble that way?"

The trader whirled on his low stool and there was an expression in his eyes that McKenzie couldn't quite pigeon-hole.

"Trouble from who?"

"Well," McKenzie faltered, wondering what he had said to roil the trader, "Trouble from Injuns or the English, or somebody."

Beaver Dick was silent a long time, and his eyes made McKenzie uncomfortable. "I've learned, boy," he said sharply, "That Injuns gen'rally leave a trader be, long as he shoots it square, 'cause they need him in their country. They'll even pertect him, sometimes. An' as for the English"—his eyes burned brighter and his voice become thinner, more pointed—"See that powder over there? Fifty barrels. Enough to blow the Snake out of its bed. She's all charged and ready to go when I light the fuse. Ever the English git to crowdin' Beaver Dick Dryden, an' we'll all go to heaven in a big noise. Savvy?"

The sharpness of the trader's words left McKenzie bewildered and without reply. Still wondering how he had aroused the man's anger, he rolled onto the spare bunk in the back room. Pat soon followed his example.

Kip was still weak, and his muscles felt the effects of the afternoon's exertion. But sleep was slow coming. And thus it was that he knew the candle in the other room burned late into the night. And the indistinct murmur of voices told him that the trader and the free trapper were talking that long while.

When at last sleep came, it was restless, fitful sleep, disturbed by dreams of nameless enemies who pursued him along the roaring Mad River. His own feet were entangled in a nightmare sloth, and he couldn't run. A horror swept over him as hands dragged him down and tied his hands. Then the phantoms left him,

tied but unhurt. And the nightmare passed.

IT was day when he awoke, and the light that filtered through the oilcloth that covered the window was in his eyes. He still felt tired, but the other bunks were empty, and he guessed that he had overslept. Groaning sleepily, he rolled over and tried to sit up. He couldn't. His arms seemed paralyzed. He tried to move them and couldn't.

The horror of his dream came back to him, and he struggled with the invisible force that held him helpless. Then his wrists were hurting, and the pain cleared his sleep-clouded brain. He looked behind him, and saw that his hands were tied.

Shocked by the discovery, he sat quiet a moment, his mind a blank. Then he tried his feet. They were free, and he swung them down to the bare floor.

"Woop," a voice arrested him. "Stay right there, McKenzie. You ain't goin' anywhere today."

Turning his head, Kip looked into the trader's face. The Yankee kindliness was gone from the pinched features, and the eyes were brittle and bright. Behind Dryden stood Loingren. The free trapper's lips were smiling, but the eyes were hard and triumphant.

Pat, wide-eyed and white of face, peered around the trapper.

"What the devil?" was all that McKenzie could say.

"Devil a-plenty for you, likely," the trader said coldly. "I know all about you, McKenzie. And don't ask me why I didn't kill you without all this fuss. 'Cause I don't know."

"Me too," Loingren growled. "No use wastin' bait on a weazel if you can shoot him."

McKenzie sat upright on his bunk. Somehow he knew that the gaunt trapper was behind all this, and he faced the cold-eyed man. "What's your game here, Loingren?" he asked.

The trapper's face sharpened. "My game all the time is to run Lobsterback spies out of a country that belongs to the United States," he avowed. "I spotted you for a Hudson's Bay agent the minute I laid eyes on you. An' if I have my way, we'll send your hide an' head up to the company, as a sample of what's waitin' for all the British if they come south of the Cour d' Alenes."

McKenzie's anger melted and he laughed shortly. "I'm beginnin' to see which way the saddle's on. But you've both got me wrong. Give me a chance and I'll prove it."

"Prove it how?"

"Why, I—" Kip frowned thoughtfully. "—I don't know."

"Uh-huh," Loingren said softly. "Neither do I." McKenzie noted then that Dryden's eyes were still brittle and hostile; but Loingren's were triumphant and mocking. He knew then the well-dressed trapper had deliberately planned the trap, and that he was fooling Dryden completely. Loingren was his enemy, then, not Dryden. And he wondered what was going on in the big trapper's mind.

He soon learned. For Loingren had taken a handful of small bird feathers from his pocket. "If you want to ask him a question or two," he was saying, "I'll be right glad to help out. These make the best way of helpin' a man talk I ever see. I learned it from a Root-digger chief. You stick the points o' these feathers down under the fingernails as far as you can—which is quite a ways, Mister Dryden—then you light the feather part with a match."

McKenzie felt no hate now. He didn't like Loingren, but if the man really thought he was a Hudson's Bay spy, Kip could understand his feeling. But he was familiar with the feather ordeal himself. He had watched it worked at Fort Provence and the tortured man was a gibbering idiot before it was over. McKenzie wanted none of it.

Hunching himself forward, he concentrated all the strength in his big body against the bonds that held his hands. The ropes cut deep into his flesh, but he threw himself into one final effort. The ropes behind him parted, and he leaped toward the trapper, as though propelled from a taut Indian bow.

The trapper swore and gave way before the giant who charged him. But Beaver Dick Dryden thrust the thin barrel of an old squirrel rifle between Kip's moving legs, and Kip crashed to the floor. Before

he could rise, Loingren was upon him, clubbing him with the butt of his big pistol.

The room darkened again before McKenzie's eyes, but he clung desperately to consciousness. And above the roaring in his ears Pat Dryden's voice sounded clear.

"Pap! Come on outside. Looks like Injuns coming. An' they're not comin' down the traders' trail!"

IV

LYING there on the floor, with the room turning about him, Kip heard a voice say, "He'll do till we get back." Then a door banged shut, and a bolt clicked into place.

McKenzie struggled to his feet and made it to the bunk and sat down. When his head had cleared, he looked around him and tried to think.

He had a thought then, and, steadying himself with one hand against the wall, he made it to the window and tried to look out. But the oilcloth wasn't to be seen through. A box of new traders' knives was open within his reach, however, and he used one to cut the cloth away. He peered out and saw only the pines and the horses in the corral.

But sight of the horses gave him an idea. Things looked as if he would have to be moving on from the post, and riding beat walking every way for Sunday in the wilderness. With a horse, he could maybe make it to the American trading posts a thousand miles to the east.

His rifle still hung over his bunk. He got it, and broke open a powder keg and drilled one jacket pocket with the explosive. His other pocket he filled from an open shot box, then he approached the window again. There still was nothing in sight but the horses. He slipped through the window and Indianed through the trees to the pole corral.

The horses were uneasy and milling in the corral, as if sensing some approaching danger. They snorted loudly at Kip's approach, and he swore in dismay at the noises they made. But the drone of the other whites' voices came to him from the other side of the house, as if they suspected nothing. There were rawhide ropes on the pole that had been nailed to the tree trunks to form the corral; and catching a horse was only a minute's work.

He was dropping one end of gate pole to lead his horse across it when an exclamation burst from a throat behind him. Whirling, he saw Sam Loingren looking at him from around the corner of the trading post. The trapper was bringing his pistol up, and there was no time to lose. McKenzie dropped the pole, swung himself to the back of the pony, and headed him off into the brush, rifle in hand. A shot whistled over his head, then a low thundering pounded in the earth. The entire horse band was stampeding through the corral gate Kip had left open.

McKenzie's first impulse was to turn around and haze the post remuda back into the enclosure. But he rejected the idea. He would probably be shot for his pains.

Forgetting the post behind him then, and the plight of the traders he had stranded afoot in the wilderness as he himself had been stranded, Kip pointed the running horse up the Snake, and flattened himself along the pony's back. The direction, he hoped, would take him over to the headwaters of the Missouri. And somewhere in all that rich fur country he would find Americans, Americans who were not afraid of their shadows in the trees.

He eased the horse to a walk about a mile from the post. He was beyond danger of pursuit from the men afoot at the post and he had a long way to go. But he kept a sharp eye behind him, so sharp that he could pay scant attention to the trail ahead. And thus it was that he nearly rode into the ambush.

It was where the Mad River emerged from a deep gorge it cut through a range of low, swarthy hills that his horse stopped suddenly and threw its ears ahead. Kip McKenzie remembered Pat Dryden's report of Indians coming, and he heeded the horse's warning. Falling into the brush on the uphill side of the trail, he crouched for a second, still holding his rawhide hackamore rope. Nor was he any too soon. For a gun popped up the trail, and the horse went down.

Dropping his hack rope, McKenzie

cocked his gun and slid silently as a shadow through the underbrush. Emerging on a little bluff above the trail, he parted the willow screen in front of him and peered through. Two Indians were in the willows below him beside the trail. They seemed to be in consultation, and McKenzie raised his gun slowly. He could kill either of them from his vantage point, and take his chances with the other.

His finger encircled the trigger, and he drew his bead. But one of the ambushers turned to skulk back up the trail, and McKenzie held his fire to watch. Suddenly, then, he drew back into the serviceberry thicket. For a big Indian war party was drawn up atop a rise by the river, awaiting the return of the scout. The tribesmen were naked, except for feathers and loin cloth, and their veneered bronze bodies were painted for battle. Their horses showed signs of hard travel.

Then McKenzie shrank further into his thicket, and his breathing stopped. For a mounted warrior in chieftain's regalia had pushed his horse through the motley ranks to the front, and the sun fell directly upon the painted face of the Otter Hat, Blackfoot chief from the upper Columbia. Behind him, also mounted on an Indian painted pony, rode Jules Charbonneau, the Bear, partisan at Fort Provence.

Charbonneau looked bigger than the bear he resembled in his knee-length hunting coat of white buckskin. And his long black beard glistened in the sun.

SETTLING back on his haunches, Kip McKenzie considered his predicament. He knew what fate the partisan had in store for him, should he be taken. The scouts had seen him, and they might have recognized him. If this were so, Charbonneau would order a halt and a search.

The brush extended far enough up the river that Kip could probably encircle the warrior band and hide in the water. But Charbonneau would not have brought a half hundred warriors along just to trail a pig-eater deserter. He must be on an expedition against the American forts in this south country. McKenzie had heard how such campaigns were conducted. The rival whites promoted such raids against each other, and planned the raids to the last detail. But they remained judiciously in the background until the Indians had done their bloody work. Then, if the attack should be beaten off, the beleagured whites would report only an Indian raid to their government. But, if the raid were successful, the Indians were rewarded with all the loot taken. The white trader who engineered the attack benefited through the elimination of his rival.

Therefore, McKenzie reasoned, this expedition must be directed against the small American post down the river. And thought of what would happen to the three whites at the defenseless post stilled the blood in his veins.

He argued briefly that it was none of his affair. Dryden would have seen him tortured, then would have killed him. But the fact remained that he, Kip McKenzie, had by chance led the Blackfeet warrior band to the little post. Remained also the more disturbing fact that he had let the Drydens' horses escape, thus depriving the three Americans of any chance to avoid the silent red death that stalked them.

And, thinking thus, he was already moving—back in the direction of the trading post. Creeping through the serviceberry bush without rustling a berried branch, he skirted the scout below him; and still in the shelter of the brush, he broke into a long, easy lope that carried him over the soft riverbank turf as fast as a horse can trot.

He reached the clearing half an hour later, and he didn't pause to announce his return. He approached the cabin without slacking his pace and struck the door with such force that it banged open and shut again behind him. Blinking his eyes against the gloom of the interior, he gaped at Beaver Dick Dryden, huddled on the floor. The back of the trader's head was bashed in.

For a full second McKenzie stood staring at the dead man, then a surprised grunt took his eyes to the far corner of the room. Sam Loingren, the free trapper, stood crouched not ten feet away

from him, a heavy traders' hammer balanced in his hand. Pat Dryden stood before the crouching man, his supple young body flattened against the ceiling-high pile of blankets. His face was colorless, his eyes wide and scared. Scratches on his face and his torn clothing told of the desperate struggle he had waged against the older, bigger man who had killed his father.

Snarling now, the trapper whirled to face McKenzie. His thin face was a contorted mask of rage, and he leaped, his hammer upraised.

Kip McKenzie's blood was hot from his long run, and he didn't wait for the fight to reach him. Lowering his head to avoid the hammer blow, he hurled his huge body against the free trapper in a stunning counter-charge. The hammer glanced off his shoulder the smallest part of a second before his other shoulder struck the trapper just below the short ribs. Every one of the tawny giant's two hundred pounds was behind the lunge, and Loingren was jackknifed to the floor with a sodden outtrushing of breath.

Kip McKenzie was quick upon him, but not before the hammer had swung once against his head, dimming his senses. Things weren't very clear for the big young Yank after that, not until he stumbled to his feet and regarded the lifeless body of the trapper on the floor. Loingren's face was blue-black now, and his thin neck was broken.

KIP McKENZIE heard a sobbing then, and he turned to see young Pat sitting on the floor with his father's broken head in his lap. Something swelled in his throat, but he swallowed it and jerked the sobbing youngster to his feet.

"There's no time for that, boy," he said roughly. "The British and Blackfeet are comin' down the river, fifty strong. We've got to get out of this gut of a place. Now."

The grief-stricken youth seemed not to understand, or not to care. He tore himself away from the bigger man's grasp and knelt again beside his cold father. "Loingren killed him," he sobbed. "He hit him with a hammer when Pap wasn't looking. Said then he was a Hudson's Bay man, and that the company was takin' over the post. Said he was going to take me back to the Columbia with him."

A cold light had broken inside McKenzie's brain as he heard the youngster's words. Jules Charbonneau and the Otter Hat hadn't followed his tracks at all. The partisan had spotted this American post sometime earlier, and had planned his expedition long before Kip's escape. And he remembered then where it was he had seen Loingren before. It was at Fort Provence just after the winter breakup. Loingren was a company man, and Charbonneau had sent him down to spy out the place and prepare it for a raid. And when McKenzie had appeared, coming as he did from the Hudson's Bay, the company agent had feared that he might be recognized and betrayed. So he acted first and convinced Dryden that McKenzie was the company spy.

But Kip's deliberation ended there. For time was getting short. He reached down again, jerked the kid to his feet a second time, then addressed him with paternal severity. "Shut up that yap. Your Pa is dead, an' all your cryin' won't bring him back. You'll be deader'n he is in five minutes, an' so will I, if you don't quit whimperin' and get out of here. Fifty Blackfeet and British are right outside."

Pat Dryden went limp in McKenzie's hands. "I don't care," he said, crying inwardly. "Pap's dead. Let 'em kill me."

Kip McKenzie stifled an oath and brought up his big hand to cuff the youngster's swollen face. "Shut up now," he commanded harshly. "Or I'll knock your block off your shoulders. We're gettin' out of here. We can't help your Pa. Maybe you don't know what it's like to be scalped. Well, I do. I've seen it. I've seen men with nothin' above their ears but a bleedin' red skull, like a cap. I've seen 'em beat their bare skulls on the ground to end their misery. I don't want none of that. And neither do you. Get a gun now, and some powder and shot. Take water-proof horns for the powder. We might have to swim."

Pat Dryden looked at him, uncomprehending. McKenzie opened the door a crack and peered out. He drew in his breath suddenly.

"Look!" he whispered. "Look out there on the edge of the timber, where them

painted devils are settin' their horses, a-lookin' the place over. You comin' now?"

Dryden stared at the fifty warriors who sat their horses not a hundred yards from the cabin, surveying the clearing carefully and mumbling among themselves. He recoiled from the sight, and shuddered. His sobbing became inaudible.

V

McKENZIE picked up a gun, saw that it was loaded and primed, and thrust it into Pat's hands. Then he slung two powder horns over his shoulder and picked up his own gun.

The Indians still lingered at the edge of timber, apparently awaiting some prearranged signal from Loingren. And Kip was gratified that the tribesmen hesitated thus. For there would be time, maybe, to execute the plan that had occurred to him as he picked up the powder horns.

"Your Pa said he had them powder kegs in the corner charged to blow the place up," he whispered to the white-faced youth behind him. "You know anything about it?"

Pat Dryden started. Then he nodded. "I helped Pap charge 'em. We fixed two fuses, one to blow up quick, in case we were cornered in here. The other is a time fuse. We fixed it with gunpowder and wet sawdust, so's we could travel quite a ways if we had a chance to get away. He allus said he never would let his stock fall into the Indians' hands, 'cause it would teach 'em to raid the next trader who come along."

"How long you think your time fuse would burn?"

"Five minutes, maybe."

Kip McKenzie's lips parted in a smile that conveyed no humor. "Light the time fuse," he commanded softly. "I'll keep an eye out."

While Pat Dryden fumbled among the boxes and blankets in a corner along the wall from the mixed powder kegs, the Blackfeet dismounted in full view of the cabin and began a cautious advance. But the yellow-haired woodsman stood quiet, watching, until Pat came back to the door.

"The fuse is fired," Dryden whispered.

McKenzie nodded his approval, then whispered his instructions without taking his eye from the crack of the door. "They're movin' in now. We'll make a run for it, toward the river. 'Member how heavy the grass an' brush overhang is along the bank? So dive deep and let the current take you around the first bend downstream. Then hit for the bank. Keep under water, and stick your nose up the brush to breathe. Let's move now. An' give 'em what you got in your gun as you go."

The approaching Indians were only about fifty yards from the house, and it was fifty to the river. It would be a tight race, but Jules Charbonneau was nowhere in sight, and McKenzie had utmost faith in the bad aiming of Indians with firearms.

With a sudden, high-pitched yell, Kip burst from the cabin and fired as he ran toward the corner of the cabin. He saw a painted buck in sub-chief's regalia clutch at his ribs and fall. He heard the report as Pat's gun exploded, saw a second brave stumble and go down. Then he was around the corner of the house; and in the scant protection it offered, he raced toward the surging stream. A sporadic shooting came from behind, and some of the whistling balls came close. But McKenzie reached the river unharmed. He heard Pat come up behind him, and he dived into the Snake without looking back.

He had no trouble keeping below the surface of the icy stream. The undertow sucked at him, pulling him under, and sweeping him downstream. When he was certain he had rounded the bend, he fought himself loose from the deadly tow and came to the surface. A big willow bush overhung the bank on the near side of the stream and he made for it. The undertow still pulled and sucked at him, and the rifle in his hand was a handicap for swimming. But he clung to it as to life itself.

He reached the bush in time and crowded his body into the maze of roots and water grass that grew along the bank below the water line. He found space for his head out of the water, among the roots of the bush itself. Half a minute later Pat Dryden worked himself under the same bush. And Pat wasn't a minute too soon. For the Blackfeet had come

around the bend. The interwoven roots and grass concealed the Indians from view of the fugitive whites, but both could hear the warriors' excited jabber, and they could judge their nearness by it.

SUDDENLY, then, the earth trembled under a shuddering explosion, as the gunpowder in the trading post went up. Dry branches clashed above the hiders, and showered them with twigs and broken bits of wood that had been the trading post.

There ensued the hollow, unbreathing stillness that follows the explosion. Then a screaming went up. And McKenzie guessed from the sound that many of the tribesmen had crowded the post for first pick of the loot. To the cries of the dying the mournful wailing of the living was soon added, and a savage satisfaction came to Kip with the knowledge that old Beaver Dick Dryden had reached back from death to wreak a terrible vengeance on the raiders. Kip hoped that Charbonneau might have been among those killed. But he had small faith in this chance. The Bear would have been too wily to show himself about the place until he was certain that the Americans had all been dispatched by his Blackfeet henchmen.

The screaming of the wounded and dying continued, but the wailing of the others swelled to a shrieking crescendo as the survivors spread along the banks, beating the brush for the escaped whites. Half a dozen, it seemed, converged on the big willow bush, and McKenzie regretted choosing so prominent a landmark for a shield. The searchers prowled about the base of the bush, and both whites let themselves deeper into the water, with only their nostrils exposed. So close were the Blackfeet that McKenzie could feel the warmth of their breathing, and smell the old smoked-leather odor that clings to the Indian from his many woodfires.

Enraged at last by the failure of the bush to give up the men they sought, the searchers beat the sprawling shrub furiously and shot into it with their guns and arrows. One arrow, tipped with a sharp steel barb furnished the Blackfeet by their English traders, pierced Pat Dryden's hand, and the shaft broke loose against the bone.

McKenzie saw the arrow strike, and he steeled himself to hear the outcry that would betray their hiding place. But there was no outcry. The white-faced youth pulled his underlip between his teeth, and bit it until a little red line of blood appeared against his teeth. But he made no sound. And McKenzie felt humbled in his presence.

For what seemed an eternal time after that, the searchers ranged up and down the bank, screaming and gibbering among themselves. Then, at last, they gave up the hunt and returned to the burning fort to wail and mourn their dead.

McKenzie and Pat Dryden remained crouched in the cold river throughout the dragging afternoon, and not until darkness had settled over the woods and the cries of the Indians had been reduced to a low moaning did either of them speak.

"What we goin' to do?" Pat whispered at length.

"Where's the nearest American trading post?" McKenzie countered.

"There's one down the river, about a hundred miles. Fort Hall. A Boston Yankee named Wyeth set up three for the trade last fall. There's a strong garrison there, too, if we could get down there."

McKenzie shifted the position of his chilling body, and considered this information carefully before replying. Both he and Pat had a gun and enough ammunition to live the rest of the summer in the wilderness, if the water hadn't spoiled their powder. The problem at the moment was to give the Blackfeet the slip.

"Is there a little dryer place we could hide in around here, till them devils leave the country?" he asked finally.

Pat Dryden was silent a moment. Then he whispered, "There's an island in the river about ten miles downstream. The brush is heavy and there's a little clearing in the middle of it. It would make a nice place to hide . . . Pap an' I cached our furs there about a month ago, all that we'd got from the Indian trade and what few we'd caught ourselves. Pap wanted to get them away from the Fort."

"Any buffalo hides?"

"A few that we got in trade with the Shoshones."

The big blond woodsman felt a new enthusiasm. "Let's move down there. We better drift downstream a ways, then swim acrost and come out on the other bank. We don't want to leave no tracks."

Disengaging himself with care from the grass and roots, Kip let himself into the water to drift silently downstream once more. Pat followed close behind him, and they stayed in close to bank, to avoid the treachery of the undertow.

VI

IT was day when the two drenched whites pulled themselves from the river onto the little island in the Snake and disappeared into the dense underbrush. Pat Dryden still led the way, and Kip McKenzie followed him to a small clearing in the center of that small knob of land. It was cozy and hidden from view. The first rays of the morning sun slanted down, and the slight warmth made Kip shiver. He pulled off his jacket, wrung the water from it, and draped it over a bush to dry. His shirt came next. Then he noticed that Pat Dryden was staring at him with unveiled apprehension in his wide eyes.

"Peel off them wet clothes, 'fore you ketch your death," Kip commanded. "The sun 'll dry 'em, an' warm us up."

Kip McKenzie stopped speaking and looked at his companion. For young Pat was acting strangely. His face was tense and pinched. He shrank from Kip and looked downright sick.

The strain of the last twenty hours had worn the woodsman's temper thin. "Don't stand there gawkin'," he said roughly "Peel them clothes off. What the devil—"

His voice trailed off into horrified silence. For two red spots had appeared along Pat's neck, and they spread upward to engulf the youthful face in a fiery blush. And in that moment, the unnerving truth burst upon Kip McKenzie.

"You—you're a girl!" he accused.

Pat Dryden flushed deeper and turned her eyes away.

"Well, I'll be switched," Kip said, there being nothing else to say. "A girl!"

Pat whirled upon him, her blue eyes aflame. "Sure I'm a girl. And what of it? Go on down the river if you don't—if you don't like girls. I can take care of myself, even if I'm not a *man*."

McKenzie could bring no reply out of the confusion in his mind. He merely stood looking at her.

"Don't stand there gawkin'," she mimicked in anger. "Peel off them wet clothes, 'fore you catch your death. That is, unless you want to run back to the Indians—from a girl."

Tossing her head, then, Pat Dryden turned and stamped off into the brush. Kip stood motionless for several minutes, looking after her. Then he grinned sheepishly and slowly peeled off his clothes.

He spread his wet buckskins on the surrounding bushes, and turned his attention to the guns lying near him on the grass. He wiped the standing water from them with handfuls of dry grass, then drew a dry cloth from his wet-proof bullet pouch and worked the steel dry with a willow ramrod. The powder was dry in the horns, and he reprimed both pieces and loaded them.

His clothes were dry, then, and he redressed and stretched out in the sun. He didn't know how exhausted he was, and he fell asleep without meaning to.

IT was late afternoon when he awoke to find Pat sitting on the ground by a large open hole where there had been only an old black campfire site before. She sat on a buffalo robe by the side of the pit, gnawing at a piece of jerky, evidently from the open cache. She looked so young and boyish that Kip McKenzie wondered briefly whether he had dreamed the incident of the morning.

But her first words disspelled all his doubts in this direction. "Glad you're awake, Mister McKenzie," she said, mocking him with her eyes as he arose to join her. "It's lonesome for a poor little girl all alone in the woods. Anyway, I'm sleepy, too, whenever you've rested enough to take the watch."

McKenzie grinned humbly, and looked the girl over soberly for a moment. "We still going to be friends?" he inquired, extending his hand.

She returned his look in silence, then accepted his hand. "I hope so," she said a little sullenly.

"Sure we will, Miss," Kip reassured, awkward and ill-at-ease in the presence of the person he had pitied and half-liked as a boy.

"Don't call me 'Miss,'" she flared. "My name's still Pat."

"Your real name, Pat?"

"Well, it's Patricia, really. But I've always been called Pat."

McKenzie sat down by the edge of the pit and accepted the slab of jerky she offered him. He chewed ravenously at the hard, dried elk and gazed into the cache. It was a hole about six feet deep and six feet wide, lined with dry brush and duff to insulate the fur from the earth's dampness, and it was nearly filled with tightly packed fur bales.

"What your furs worth?" he asked.

"There are ten packs. Each one weighs hundred pounds, and Pap figured each at about a thousand dollars."

Kip reflected. "That's a mighty lot of money in this country, Miss—Pat."

"A mighty lot of fur," Pat Dryden corrected. "And a fine lot of good it'll do me, buried here. Without any horses, we'll do well to get our own hides through to Fort Hall, let alone these here. I only opened the cache to get at this jerky."

"Good job you did open it," Kip commented, looking at the buffalo robes. " 'Cause with these buffalo skins I'll make us the best ole bull boat you ever saw. One that'll float us right down to Fort Hall, with all your furs on board."

Pat Dryden looked skeptical. "You're not on the Columbia, mister," she said. "This is the Mad River. And that is a good name. It's the toughest old crick in the country. A man can't even take a canoe down it, let alone a skin boat."

McKenzie grinned. "I've heard tell of *voyageurs* who've boated down it," he said, a little proudly, "And I can take a boat anywhere them Frenchmen can."

Pat wasn't convinced. "I've heard the *voyageurs* are mighty good boatmen."

McKenzie looked wounded. "You ain't seen me in a boat," he said. a little sullenly.

There came another silence, which Kip broke to ask a question that had been in his mind for more than an hour. "Where'd you come from, Pat? An' what was your dad thinkin' about, lettin' you come up into this place?"

He asked the question in all innocence. But he would have recalled it. For the girl's eyes again flashed their anger. "There you go again, Kip McKenzie," she accused. "For the last time. I can take care of myself as well as any man. And if you despise us 'mopsies' so much, you'd better go find a man to travel with."

Kip was conciliatory. "Now, don't carry on so. Maybe I'm changin' my mind. Anyhow, you've acted like a man so far, an' as long as you do, I'll treat you like one. But I'll bet you're the only white girl west of the Missouri. What you doin' here?"

Pat Dryden was silent a minute, then she shrugged her shoulders and told her story in a low, strong voice. "Pap was agent at a reservation back on the Platte," she told. "He was there quite a while. Finally he got permission to move me an' Mom out. We were there about three years. Then there was an uprising. Mom was killed. . . .

"Pap and I were away from the agency at the time," she resumed after a moment, and her voice was husky but steady. "We found Mom later. The Indians were after us, too, at the time, but we hid in an old well and finally got away. The gov'ment removed Pap, though. I thought we'd go back east, but he'd seen traders getting rich from the Indian trade, so he invested in the stock of goods and came further west.

"He had funny ideas, like you, about me coming with him. But I wouldn't go back east. Anyway, there was no place to go. So he dressed me like a boy and let me come. We'd been here about a year before Loingren showed up, posing as an American. He fooled us so bad we believed what he said about you."

Mention of the company agent brought an unpleasant thought to Kip McKenzie. "Did Loingren know that you—uh, that you wasn't a boy?" he asked.

The girl looked away and shuddered. "He must have, the way he acted. Pap trusted him a lot. He may have told him."

McKenzie recalled the look on Loin-

gren's face there in the cabin as he advanced on the girl, and recollection of the feeling in his own fingers as they closed about the man's neck brought with it a savage satisfaction, an exotic pleasure that he didn't fully understand.

"How's the hand?" he asked suddenly, remembering her wound.

She showed him a hand tied up in coarse cloth and tanned buckskin.

"What about the arrowhead?"

She smiled a little. "I pulled it out with my teeth before we left the bush."

Kip McKenzie was further humbled. Maybe Pat Dryden, like his mother, was different. But he held stubbornly to his beliefs concerning women in general.

He told Pat to go to sleep, and he disappeared into the brush with his rifle to watch the wooded bank across the stream.

VII

THE next three days, filled as they were with hard, frantic work, passed quickly. And, in accordance with an unspoken agreement, neither Kip nor Pat made reference to Pat's being a girl. Kip had determined to go on thinking of her as the boy he had known at first, but he found this attitude harder and harder to maintain. But Pat never guessed it.

The big job was building the bull boat. It was Kip's first effort, but he had watched the *voyageurs* at Fort Provence until he knew the process by heart. His greatest handicap was lack of tools. The cache, however, had yielded a sharp hand-ax, and with this and his knife and a small, buried fire, he began construction of the river craft.

First, he trimmed two slender cottonwood windfalls into fifteen-foot lengths for the foundation of the structural frame. The poles he joined together, six feet apart, with a transverse brace at either end and one in the center. Pat's rifle had to be sacrificed to make the holes into which the braces were fitted, and while Pat kept watch for hostiles, Kip heated the end of the gun barrel again and again in his small, smokeless fire, then burned the holes into the soft, cured wood of the poles.

Twice, Blackfeet searching parties passed along the river bank, and Kip had to smother his small fire until they had passed.

By the end of the second day on the island, the foundation of the boat was completed; and on the following day they both worked at weaving a willow frame around the crude cottonwood structure, using the tough, pliable red birch willow that abounded on the island. The wicker frame interlaced the poles firmly on their braces, and curved upward about a foot to heavier birch willows, laid parallel to the cottonwood poles and about a foot above them. At the end of the second day's work, the bull boat resembled a great, flat, wicker tray—fifteen feet long, six feet wide, and a foot deep.

On the third day, they covered the frame with buffalo hides from the cache. The hides, placed hair to the outside, were stitched tightly together with thongs cut from a tanned deerskin also from the cache. When evening ended the day, they dragged the craft to the river and launched it. They found it sea-worthy, and Kip christened it the "Pat Dryden." By about midnight, they had loaded all the furs from the cache onto its center, and it rode the water well.

A short time later, the amateur *voyageurs* set sail. Kip stood in the bow with a long pole to steer, and Pat sat in the stern with a shorter paddle-pole to help where she could. But the country was level here, the river sluggish on the surface, and there wasn't much steering to do.

They put into shore with the first hint of dawn, to await the protection of another darkness before sailing on. Overhang was abundant, so they had no difficulty in concealing the boat.

"Your Mad River ain't so tough," Kip grunted as they settled themselves to sleep the daylight away, by turns.

"You haven't seen anything of it yet," Pat said gravely. "Wait till we hit the rapids."

They sailed again when dusk was thick, and as the night wore on, Kip had reason to recall the girl's warning. For he felt a quickening of the current beneath the light craft. Rocks loomed ahead in the dark, and he worked hard at steering the boat between them, throwing weight at

the pole. He wished heartily it was day.

But when day dawned at last, he wasn't glad. For the boat was still in the rapid and the swell of the current and the treacherous rocks made it impossible to put into shore. He had the uncomfortable feeling they were being watched. He could see the end of the rapid a quarter of a mile downstream, but before they had reached it, a party of Blackfeet appeared on a little hill along the bank. Kip hove the boat toward the opposite shore but kept it pointed downstream. He couldn't afford to put in, not even on the other bank.

"This the end of the rapids?" he shouted, hopefully, at Pat.

She made him a grimace. "It's just the start. That one was nothing. There's a real one about five miles below us. And the Devil's Dive is a mile below that. The Indians can't follow us there, because the walls are a thousand feet high. But Pap said nobody had ever taken a boat through it."

Kip grinned. "The devil will shore be surprised to see us then, won't he?" he yelled. "Take the gun an' keep them devils jumpin' while I put this ship down the crick."

BUT Kip's words were lighter than his heart at the moment. For already a scattered firing was coming from the shore, and shot and arrows hailed around the boat. Pat returned the fire like a veteran, drawing the cartridge from her pouch, biting it, pouring powder down the gun muzzle, capping the piece, and firing it with accurate eye. This she kept up rapidly for four and a half miles, over which the boat did not move very speedily. The Blackfeet, fearing either the gun or the river's undertow, never offered to ride into the water to intercept the craft. And Kip allowed the girl behind him a grudging admiration. She was acting like a man, all right.

Then, as the roar of the rapids ahead sounded in Kip's ears, a shouting on the bank took his attention. The Indian party had increased, but, more important than this, Jules Charbonneau had openly joined the party. He rode along the bank, his black beard glistening, and he gesticulated wildly. The booming of the rapid drowned his words, but it was evident he was warning them against the river ahead.

A funny thing for Charbonneau to do, Kip reflected, and he was about to turn and suggest that Pat try her sights on the white man when he again felt the quickening current pull at the boat. The banks ahead steepened to merge with the gray beetling cliffs, beyond which the Indians couldn't go. And the river channel was narrowing to a crooked chasm, studded with rearing blacktop rocks and white-lashed waves that topped the rocks.

Kip swung his pole into the boat behind him and called to Pat for the shorter paddle she had used from the stern. She handed it up to him, and he noted the confidence in her eyes. This pleased him, but he had no time to reflect on it. For the current had gripped the light boat and hurled it into the riffles of the chasm.

Cautioning Pat with a shout, Kip kneeled in the prow to avoid being thrown out of the lurching craft, and he strained at his heavy paddle to keep the boat straight. The fragile craft was now wafted through the narrowing gorge at terrific speed. It was so light that it rode the tops of the waves, bucking and bobbing entirely out of the man's control. But even as the spray from the higher rocks lashed his face, Kip thanked fortune for this lightness. For a heavier boat would have been ripped apart on the hidden, jagged rocks that underlay the white-capped breakers.

Once, he glanced back, to see Pat sitting halfway between the center and the stern, her hands gripping either side of the churning craft. Her face was white and scared, but she was keeping her weight carefully centered. And his theory about women suffered another jolt.

Suddenly and with no warning, the *Pat Dryden* shot out into a calm. It still traveled at a speed that would have crumbled the frail wicker frame by force of its own velocity. But it slowed gradually with the water, and Kip chanced a look around.

They were in a sort of box canyon with a water floor. The river spread wide and seemed hardly to move. Gray perpendicular cliffs rose from the edge of the water on every side, jutting straight up for a thousand feet. It made him dizzy,

looking up at them. And the Indians were nowhere in sight.

The boat still moved with the sluggish current, and Kip hove into a shallow near the base of the frowning gray wall. Then he turned to look at Pat, and at the walls beyond. "Looks like we're shore in a box," he punned weakly. "Does the Snake just end here? Just sink into the ground?"

Pat shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "I never knew anyone who had ever been this far. They talked about the Devil's Gate being down here, and the Devil's Dive, and the men who came to the post. But I don't know where they are."

KIP'S eyes searched the big blue-ceilinged stone room again. He still saw no opening in the walls, but the water was definitely moving toward the lower end of the box canyon. There might be an opening between the folds of the gray cliffs down there. Or the water might sink into some great subterranean channel to emerge somewhere far down the country. The boat might be sucked into such a cavern if they drifted too close.

This wasn't pleasant speculation. But the gray walls on every side had been worn smooth as glass by centuries of water erosion. They could not climb out of the box, and they couldn't go back up the rapid. And, he reasoned, they couldn't just sit there and starve. They could, but it would be uncomfortable.

He met Pat Dryden's big blue gaze. And for the first time he saw her only as a woman. The slim, long-legged figure he had found rather ridiculous as a boy was now shapely and desirable as a woman. The face, so delicately moulded and so finely colored, also ridiculous in Pat Dryden the boy, was attractive and nice to look at in Pat Dryden the woman.

Kip McKenzie checked this rather dangerous trend of thought, and retreated into his old concept of womanhood. Pat Dryden was just an ordinary woman after all. And it was the old, old story—old as Adam himself. Here they were, a man and a woman, in a tight spot. And the woman it was who had really brought them there. The man was trying to figure a way out. And the woman, entirely helpless, sat hopeful and trusting, waiting for him to do it.

But he found this attitude difficult to preserve when he looked back into the deep pools of her eyes. So he deliberately worked the boat loose and let it drift with the stream. He was all at once very self-conscious, and somewhere in his sub-conscious self was the disturbing knowledge that he drifted down to the unknown in this manner only to impress the girl with his own bravado.

Soon again he felt a quickening of the water, and he knew they approached some kind of outlet. He kept the craft in the eddy at the base of the wall where he could put in at a moment's warning. And all the while a roaring which he thought at first came from the rapid above swelled louder in his ears. It was a booming, reverberating roar of lashing water. The outlet was closer than he had imagined.

They came upon it suddenly as the boat rounded a gigantic fold in the structure of the wall—so suddenly that Kip had barely time to throw his weight onto the steering pole and crowd the boat against the wall. There was no eddy here. The water was sweeping in a tremendous plunge toward a narrow crevice in the wall. It pulled at the boat, but Kip drove his pole solidly against the river bottom and held the prow against the rock with a strength born of desperation. He called meantime to Pat to take the other pole and hold the stern in a similar way.

Then, with the boat secure for the moment, the woodsman let his eyes go down the gorge for the first time. And he recoiled in horror from what he saw.

The river below was crowded into a channel hardly twenty feet wide, and the surging water fought its way through an even more narrow gateway in the cliffs to be hurled back against the smooth gray walls beyond. Great blacktop rocks jutted high in the channelway, cutting the stream into segments barely as wide as a bull boat. The swift-falling water whipped itself to white fury on these rocks. And as far as he could see, the channel stretched away, a narrow, tortuous gorge of death-tipped rocks and raging white-capped water.

This, then, was Devil's Dive!

Kip shrank from looking at the girl behind him, for fear she would see in his eyes the horror he felt. But soon he heard her shout, and he turned to see she was pointing up the canyon. He followed the course of her finger, and what he saw wrenched a surprised curse from his taut lips. For a canoe had shot out of the upper rapid into the calm above them. A small birch canoe, with only one man aboard. And that man was Jules Charbonneau.

THE canoe nearly capsized when it hit the calm. But the Hudson's Bay partisan righted it and made for the bull boat with long, confident strokes. The Canadian, Kip had to admit, was a river man.

Driving his small craft in close to the bull boat with graceful skill, the burly company man grasped the edge of the bigger boat to steady his own. And he looked at the Americans out of his red-rimmed black eyes, lingering longest on Pat Dryden. His hat was missing, and he was completely drenched from the spray of the rapid. His wet hair and beard were matted about his shaggy head, and he looked more than ever like a huge bear.

"Aha, my peeg-eater," his rolling voice boomed at Kip, "You are in the bad feex, no?"

"Bad enough, Charbonneau," Kip responded, shouting to make himself heard above the roar of the water. "What are you doin' here?"

The partisan leered. "Charbonneau, he do not come to zave the deserter. But he know what a feex you be in down here. He come to zave the white girl."

Kip frowned, and he wondered how the man could know Pat was a girl. "What girl?" he countered.

"What girl?" the partisan grinned triumphantly. "The peeg-eater, he theenk he put beeg fool on Charbonneau, no? Charbonneau, he ees fool lak fox. Loingren's Injun runners, they tell Charbonneau of the gal, 'fore I come down. The white girl, she ees rare in thees woods, no? Yah. She ees worth saving for Charbonneau. She come weeth me now, no?"

Pat sat still in the bottom of the boat, fascinated and repelled at once by the Canadian's devouring eyes. Kip had seen men look at women that way before, and experienced an impelling desire to kill the bearish man.

"Charbonneau, he has rode the Devil's Slide once in canoe," the partisan went on. "Charbonneau, he the best damn boater in the lan'. No one else ever do her. Thees beeg skeen boat, she no go through. Only Charbonneau's canoe. The girl, she come now?"

Pat Dryden still stared at the man, and her lips barely moved. Kip read rather than heard her question, "What about Kip?"

"Heem, the peeg-eater?" The partisan shot Kip a contemptuous half-look. Then he shrugged. "Save heem to keel heem for the company? May-bee. But the canoe, she ees only tak' two. That ees all. Only two."

The girl tore her eyes away from the man's face, and she glanced toward Kip, trying meanwhile not to look down the death gorge. Kip misinterpreted her look, and he felt a great contempt for her—for all women. "Better go," he shouted wearily. She'd go anyway. "He's right about this boat. It won't go through the gorge." And, strangely enough, Kip didn't care much that it wouldn't.

But he saw the old anger blaze in the girl's eyes, and he knew in that moment that he loved her—dearer than anything in life. All men are honest, even with themselves, when death is near.

"This is my boat," Pat shouted back at him. "At least, the buffalo hides on it are mine. And the cargo. You go if you want. I stay with my ship."

Kip McKenzie felt a surge of triumph, although he didn't know why. Death still lurked in the gorge below. But death didn't seem near as important, now.

Then Jules Charbonneau did a strange thing. He leaned close and started to climb from his canoe into the bull boat. Kip watched him narrowly, and signaled to Pat for his rifle. She tossed it to him with her free hand, and he held the prow against the rock with one hand, his other held the gun, pistol-fashion.

The Canadian was in the boat now, and his freed canoe shot through the water gateway and was smashed to matchwood

on the first rock. All eyes followed it, reluctantly, as it disappeared into the froth of the maelstrom. Charbonneau was standing in the middle of the boat, and Kip met his eyes.

"What you aimin' to do, Charbonneau?" he demanded.

"The big man grinned easily, confidently. "Charbonneau ver' damn good *voyageur*. The two of us, may-bee we tak' the boat through. No?"

Kip was suspicious. "And after we get through?"

The partisan shrugged. "Then I tak' the girl weeth me to Fort Provence. She be my wife then, if I lak' her all right."

Kip's eyes narrowed. "And where will I be all this time?"

"You, my peeg-eater, weel be dead. Charbonneau, he keel you when we are through the rapeeds. I have to keel you anyhow—for the company."

Kip raised his gun threateningly. But the partisan smiled almost pleasantly. "You weel not keel me now. For you would die then, too, on the rocks. No?"

KIP looked into the red-rimmed eyes for a long time. Then he shrugged. What the partisan said was true. One man couldn't take the boat through the Devil's Dive alone. Maybe two couldn't. But the partisan was willing to gamble his life for possession of the girl—first against the river, then against him, Kip McKenzie, once they were through the bad water.

And, after all, the American reflected, the odds would be about even. Charbonneau was famed throughout the north woods as a boater and a fighter, and he was big. But Kip was equally big, and he no longer feared the company man. He had feared him once. But for more than a month now, Kip had been a free man. He had shifted for himself in the wilderness against heavy odds, and he had saved the life of a likable girl. He did not shrink from meeting the partisan on even terms. He put down his gun. "Stay aboard, Charbonneau. We'll take the boat through. And we'll settle the other business later."

The lusty Canadian grinned his satisfaction. "That ees ver' good for Charbonneau. *Tres, tres bon!* Now he tak' the bow. He ver' damn good boater."

Kip knew the partisan was good as his brag on water. He was veteran of many rivers and many boats, and he could do a better job in the prow than Kip could hope to do, especially since he had been through the Devil's Dive once before. And, if the partisan were in the prow and Kip in the stern, Kip would have the drop when the time came for showdown between them.

So ran the woodsman's thoughts. But he felt Pat's wide blue eyes on him, and a stubborn pride overruled his reason. "I'll keep the prow," he said positively. "You can work the longer pole from the stern."

Perhaps Charbonneau, too, realized the advantage the arrangement would give him in the final settlement with Kip. For he acquiesced and took up a position in the stern.

For a moment, Kip considered handing his gun to Pat, in the event he might need help when the showdown came. But again his pride interfered. And, as he thought of it further, he gloated secretly at the position in which he had placed the girl. She was unarmed now, and entirely dependent upon him, Kip McKenzie, for protection. He chanced another look at her.

She was seated midway between the stern and the center of the boat. Charbonneau was settled in the stern, his pole ready. Pat's face was a little whiter, a little more child-like. But her eyes were confident. And when Kip turned his face back toward the Devil's Dive he had forgotten that the coming struggle was one of empire—a battle for a country. For the moment it was a much more important thing, a fight between men to save the life and gain possession of the woman they both desired.

He released the boat.

VIII

THE boat drifted uncertainly for a moment toward the narrow rock gateway; then some invisible force seemed to pick it up and hurl it with savage force into the roaring channel. The suddenness and the speed of the first lunge took Kip's breath, and the boat missed the first

jutting black top rock by sheer good luck and accident. For a hundred yards, then, or five hundred—Kip couldn't tell which—the channel was a straight, steep-walled trough; the water was a glassy slide, unbroken by protruding rocks.

The boat shot down it like an arrow from a stout bow. Then a high gray wall blocked passage ahead, and the river turned sharply around it. The boat bore straight down upon the cliff wall, and Kip stood up, the pole balanced in his hand. And when the boat was so near the wall he could reach it with the pole, he threw his whole weight upon the short stick. The boat turned and shot around the intruding cliff—turned so suddenly that Kip lost his balance and was hurled to his back in the bottom of the boat.

He had shattered glimpses of startled faces behind him. Then he was on his feet again, fighting the jagged black rocks that rushed at him. The boiling water struck these rocks and was hurled into the air in a thousand foamy pinnacles. These pinnacles were raging white horses, and the boat was tossed from one to another, sometimes out of the water entirely.

From here on, there was no time, no distance. Only the bucking motion of the boat, only the roar of the water, the ragged rocks, and the gray walls rushing by, near enough, it seemed, that he could touch them by reaching out his hand on either side. And Kip was alone in a universe of black rocks and enraged water that swept over him in white clouds, water that struck him with a battering, suffocating force, filling his eyes and nostrils, destroying his hearing.

Kneeeling now in the battered bow, Kip jabbed blindly at the rocks. Sometimes his efforts seemed to help, other times the boat seemed to leap clear of the treacherous obstacles and hit the water again with shuddering force.

Then, as suddenly as the rapid had started, it ended. The gray walls fell away, and the bull boat shot out into a wide valley, as though projected from a gun. The wicker frame creaked as the boat struck, and a great cloud of water went up.

But there was no time for relaxation, for Kip. Jules Charbonneau had known before the American that the rapid had ended, and that moment's time gave him the advantage both had foreseen. He had made it in some way to the fur pile and was lying across it. He held a bell-muzzled pistol, and it was trained on Kip's chest. There was no triumph in the small red eyes. Only an intentness to finish the business at hand, and to be on with his carefully conceived plan.

Kip flashed a look at Pat, still seated in the bottom of the boat behind the furs. She sat very still, making no move to interfere. The partisan must have climbed right over her, and yet she had called no warning. She had, he reflected, placed herself entirely in his hands. And, for some reason, the thought pleased him. Even if it had placed him at a disadvantage.

The gun in the hand of the partisan exploded. It was trained squarely on Kip's chest. But a wave seemed to strike the boat at the second the gun went off, and the ball merely tore the sleeve of the American's jacket, burning his arm.

This seemed strange to Kip. But there was no time for more contemplation. Coming to his feet, he charged the bearded man. Charbonneau snarled his rage and hurled his gun straight at Kip's face, and his aim was better than the first. It struck Kip squarely between the eyes. It dazed him, but didn't stop him. He leaped over the fur bales and grappled with the partisan.

THE battle, brief as it was, was a battle of giants. And Kip understood in that moment why Charbonneau was called the Bear. His thick arms seized the younger man and crushed the air from his chest. Kip was still groggy from the pistol blow, and the world turned before his eyes.

Acting on reflex alone, he spread his arms wide, then brought them together simultaneously against the big body, his thumbs gouging the thick, flat short-ribs.

Roaring with pain, Charbonneau broke his crushing hold and brought a big fist up to Kip's chin. And Kip staggered back against the fur bales.

For a moment, then, they measured each other, as elk bulls measure each other before the final charge. It was the first good look Kip had had at the

square, bearded face, and the sight brought to the surface all the rankling hatred that had festered inside him for five years—hatred not only for the man, but the company and the entire way of life he symbolized. A desire to kill arose inside him, too strong to be resisted. He launched himself in an unsteady lunge toward the powerful company man.

The Bear saw the American's eyes were glazed, saw him reel as he lunged. He sensed his advantage, and he stepped back to take his stance and wait for the kill.

But he, too, seemed to lose his balance for a second, and in that second, Kip was upon him.

The boat shivered to the impact of the big bodies, and Charbonneau felt himself going over the edge of the craft. He grappled with the big American, but Kip's fist crashed into his face, and the Bear went over the edge of the boat, taking two handfuls of buckskin from Kip's jacket with him. He bobbed a moment in the water, like a huge black cork; his hair and beard spread blacker yet around him. Then a hoarse scream broke from his throat as an unseen monster seized him and dragged him under the surface.

The undertow of the treacherous Snake was strong below the rapids. It had claimed another victim.

* * *

A MAN'S pride, Pat Dryden McKenzie told her grandchildren in later years, comes right next to his stomach. And in recounting the incident on the Snake River that day, she related how she could have downed Charbonneau with her paddle pole as he sighted the pistol across the fur bales—and thus ended the fight much sooner than she did.

But she knew Kip would never have forgiven her, and already she had decided to marry him. So she just rocked the boat to spoil the partisan's aim. And later, when Charbonneau was getting the better of the fight, when he stepped back to deliver the killing blow to the dazed Kip, she just stuck her foot out without Kip seeing her. She tripped the Bear and opened him for Kip's charge.

"But don't you tell your grampa," she cautioned. "He's a hale man, and would likely have finished the Canadian off anyway in time. And he's mighty peevish these days, what with all these Yankee steamers on the Columbia, taking away his boating business. He says they're trying to make Oregon just like St. Louis, and that one bull boat is worth the whole lot of the steamers.

"But, then, your grampa was always a wilful man, and if we don't humor him these next days, he may turn down the steamer captain's job the company has offered him. He might even try to run his horrid little bull boats up the Snake, where the steamers can't go. And we can't have that. I'm a mite too old now to go along and look after him."

. . . But fifty years ago, up in the Mad River wilderness below the Devil's Dive, Pat Dryden was not so restrained. She had her plan for the future, but she was faced with the task of making the man by her side think it was his own.

They stood on a barren promontory that rose above the river, and she had let Kip put his arm about her waist while they stood in the wind and looked out over the waste land that rolled away to low white cliffs and mountains. Below them, their bull boat was grounded, and a camp had been made. On the boat was their fortune, the ten packs of fur.

"I don't want to leave this country," she said softly. "It is my home."

It was a challenge, and Kip searched his brain for a plan to aid the helpless girl at his side. "You could sell the fur to Wyeth at Fort Hall," he suggested, his face grave with thought. "Then you could go east. If you still wanted to come back, you could buy more traders' goods, and open a post somewhere here. That is, if you had a man to help you."

"That's what we'll do," she said eagerly. "And we'll tell the people back east about the country here. They'll come with their families and plows, and make it a fine big country. And we'll fight the Hudson's Bay and hold the country till they get here."

But the big man at her side scowled. "We? It's your fur. It'll be your money. I can't have much to do with it."

The girl looked up into the bronze face above her, and she smiled secretly. "But you wouldn't desert me now. I

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know. I'll hire you now. And you can take stock in our company for pay."

Then she reached up and kissed him.

They were standing thus when the sun went down below the distant blue horizon. The sky darkened with night, and part of a moon moved down, pulling the sky with it toward Oregon. The thin light fell on a line of ghostly white humps in the distance.

"See," the girl said, half in play, half in conviction, "the white-topped wagons are already coming!"

But Kip McKenzie was filled with the seriousness of life, with the responsibilities of being a man with a wife and a business, with the duty of winning a country.

"It's only the white cliffs," he corrected, his voice a little gruff. "There's no whitetops coming."

Kip was half right. The white humps Pat saw *were* only cliffs. But Pat was also right. For the whitetops were coming, a hundred thousand of them in long snail-like processions across burned prairies to the green mountains. They were coming, but they were still twenty years away. The dusty, bright-eyed men who would pilot the whitetops were waiting for an even mightier race of men to blaze the trails for them and to plant the first germs of the civilization the white wagons would bring.

And this mightier race would not fail. Because their women stood beside them on barren river promontories, looking westward and planning—without fear. . . .

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

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The Trail to Santa Fe

By HUGH V. HADDOCK

FROM the brink of a mighty river,
To the south where the Spaniard lay,
With naught beside the stars to guide,
Stretched the trail to Santa Fe;
And the eyes of a cunning foeman
Have watched for the wagon-trains,
As they sought the track for the journey back
To the land where it never rains.

It was Death who rode there by the skinner,
And the Devil demanded his pay,
But they counted small cost of the lives that were lost
On the trail to Santa Fe;
For the fingers that beckoned them onward
Were the buttes of a land that was strange
And the sight that brings cheer to the pioneer,
The peaks of a far-distant range.

They went for the love of the going,
And they fought for the joy of the fray,
They gambled for gold that their hands couldn't hold,
On that trail to Santa Fe.
The game that they played was a freeze-out,
And Fate stacked the deck on a few,
But the hands were played as the cards were laid,
And never a gambler drew.

From the brink of a mighty river,
To the south where the Spaniard lay,
Where the desert heat and the gaunt mesquite,
Marked the trail to Santa Fe,
They rode forth, the hearts that were fearless,
And the spirits to wandering pressed,
And they played out their strings,
Where the Maker of things,
Built the buttes of the wild Southwest.

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REDSKIN STAMPEDE

By JACK STERRETT

Piute hellions had looted, murdered, destroyed everything Ward Bolt owned. But before the whalebone-tough plainsman cashed in his chips, he swore he'd ride one last, mad stampede!

A HARD man, this rawboned, black-bearded Ward Bolt, stained by sweat and dust and wearied by killing days of unceasing travel, but hard—as hard as the saddle in which he sat and as tough as the big, roan gelding he rode. Leaning forward, his shapeless hat pulled down against the slanting rays of the westering sun, his big body was tense as his flinty eyes stared down into the shadows of the little valley spread below him beneath the rimrock slopes. He swore and the fringed buckskin of his frontiersman's shirt spilled dust as his powerful, right hand shot involuntarily toward the big Sharps rifle in his saddle-scabbard.

He swore softly again and relaxed to an intent study of the scene. What he saw through deepening shadows and stratified haze was the mounting, thin fingers of a dozen campfires, the peaked ridges of as many lodges of buffalo hides. It was the camp of that very band of marauding Piutes he had so doggedly been trailing for days.

Ward realized instantly that tiny though he might be if seen at such a distance his silhouette must soon be marked by sharp eyes below. He reined quickly to the shelter of a pile of boulders. And a smouldering, hot fire put hate in his narrowed eyes as he watched the activity in the Indian camp.

These were the devils who had murdered and burned his pardner during his absence from their ranch. Failing to run the white men out of the country, Comanches, Apaches, Piutes and others had turned terrorists. Every man of them, they were rustlers, stage robbers and worse. And, almost, the blood was still on the hands of this particular bunch from their massacre of the settlements outlying Fort Hall. And, in particular, that blood was on the hands of their wolf-faced leader, El Escorpion, half-Mex, half-Piute and rightly named the Scorpion. Yes, by Heaven, El Escorpion, himself, had murdered big Jack Lesser. . . . At least, it would be El Escorpion who would pay for that crime!

Ward's lips were a cruel, white line. El Escorpion had no idea that he had been followed. That murdering renegade had been careful that not a single soul had survived from the ranches attacked. He had burned the ranches to the ground and driven away a lot of beef. He had no idea that one man, Ward Bolt, had not been home and he was now dreaming such a fantastic thing as the possibility of attack by that one man. But Ward, himself, was figuring on it. Why the hell else had he trailed this outfit for nearly a week!

The rimrock, falling away to the valley below, marked the crumbling edge of the vast expanse of plains across which Ward had been travelling for several days. As he noted that none of the stolen cattle were sheltered in the hollow, he turned to search the rolling sea of the plains on all other sides. Then he saw the small, dark blot of the herd in the distance to one side and the tiny figure of the one Piute riding herd. And in that instant, into his plotting mind, leaped a grim plan.

MINUTES later, while dusk still withheld its mantle from the surface of the prairie, he was riding toward the herd. He was naked to the waist and his body was smeared with red earth. He rode barebacked, clamping his gelding's ribs in the bent-kneed, Indian fashion, and his black hair was as long and straight almost as an Indian's as he bent over his horse's neck. He rode in

The next instant, the herd was exploding through the middle of the camp with the effect of stunning, detonating dynamite.

the wild and breakneck fashion that a Piute or Apache always employed.

The Indian on herd saw him long before he grew close but gave him little more than a glance, so perfect was Ward's simulation of another redskin's manner. And it was not until the big man was actually rump-skidding the red horse to a halt beside him that the Piute's beady eyes suddenly flared with sharp suspicion. His nostrils quivered to the sudden scent of deadly danger. His face convulsed and his lean, right hand shot savagely to grasp the lance which lay across his naked thighs. But he had time only for that one gesture, no time at all to utter a sound from gaping lips nor make any other move. Ward's six-shooter flamed smashing, pounding lead which lifted him from his mustang and hurled him to the ground.

The small, compact herd of longhorned steers whirled as one animal to face the scene of that sudden confusion. Stampede fever flared in their red-rimmed eyes and gaping nostrils. But they heard nothing more, nor saw anything to cause them to break. Slowly they quieted and returned to their grazing. Nothing there but a redskinned man-thing sitting quietly on his horse, a huddled and shapeless something on the ground and a riderless mustang running aimlessly across the plains into the dusk.

Velvety, black darkness had overflowed the hollow and spread over all the plains, swallowing sight of anything that moved save the falling stars in the brilliant expanse above. Ward poised the restless bunch of fifty rawboned steers on the very rim of the gulch, almost. He had selected them carefully for poundage, for temper and brute power. Waiting, now, he held them almost motionless in a tight-packed knot.

He was waiting for the fires below to die down to mere blots of glowing embers. When they became simple dots to guide him and with no light to betray him, his time would have come.

No thought passed through the big man's mind that this thing he proposed to do was simple insanity and suicide. The passion for vengeance, carried broodingly and bitterly for days, had here blown high and cleared away the possibility of any other thought save the full squaring of accounts for the death of his pard.

Just for a moment, thinking of Jack Lesser, Ward's grim rigidity and cruelness relaxed and he was a shaken and softened man. The starlight sparkled on a tear which poised in the corner of one eye, plunged and ran down into his beard. Just for an instant, his hands shook and his body trembled. Never again would he hear Jack's rollicking, roaring laugh, nor see the toss and sweep of his mane of golden, blond hair, the surge of great, bull-like shoulders and his careless, happy grin. Almost, Ward sobbed. The next instant, he was again a man of rigid, cruel stone.

He had resaddled. His buskskin shirt was once more strained across his chest and his hat pulled down hard over black eyebrows. He glowered down into the blackness of the bowl. Now, at last, the fires were almost dead and there was a breathing, hushed stillness. Except for the herdsman out on the plains and a sentry who had come straggling up at dark toward a post in the rimrocks, all the camp slept. And those two slept too —the sleep of death. Ward had seen the sentry coming, had hidden in the rocks and had whipped his iron arm around the Piute's neck as he passed within two feet of him. It had been done without a sound.

Now! Softly, softly, Ward urged the mossy-horned leaders of the herd over the edge of the rim to the trail which wound down to the valley. Softly! He nudged the laggards. Every time horn nicked horn, his heart leaped. Every time a pebble rolled, he held his breath. But not a sound came up from below, no stir of movement. The embers of the nearly dead fires were unwinking eyes. Not understanding, reluctant and dragging, the very slowness of the herd to move about in the dark made their progress quiet. And when they reached the bottom of the cliffs, they stood closely packed, staring and softly blowing.

WARD wiped the sweat from his forehead and took a deep breath. All right, he was now about a hundred and fifty, maybe two-hundred yards from

the looming, black shadow of the nearest lodges. Just enough space in which to get a herd running, to get them running hard and, at the last moment, to explode them into a frenzied and blind stampede. Close to a ton of muscle and bone apiece, they would hurtle through those lodges like stones through paper! Ward stepped down to tighten the cinch to his saddle. And as he did so, a silent, swift shadow arose behind him and whipped powerful arms around his throat.

Ward was no child. He was a raw-boned man of the plains carrying a hundred and ninety pounds of muscle and explosive energy. Yet the mighty grip which snatched his feet from the earth handled him as though he was a boy. The iron pressure around his throat sent roaring flames through his brain. For a frantic, kicking instant, he knew death. Then by lashing his heels back into the groin of the man who held him, he managed to burst free. With a laboring gasp for air, he snatched for his six-shooter and whirled. He whipped the weapon upward, then arrested the motion with a stunned exclamation.

"Jack! Lordamighty—"

Huge arms groping, the lunging giant who plunged toward him came to stumbling halt. His great head flung high, his blue eyes blazing, his blond mane was a flame of silver in the light of a rising moon. His giant body quivered as he stared. "Ward!" he grunted. "Ward Bolt—old pard!"

In the next instant they were in each other's arms, pounding each other's back, choking curses of joy.

"Well, hell, Jack," Ward swore with deep feeling. "I figgered you was dead. I found a burned body in the ashes of the ranchhouse!"

"That was the one redskin," Lesser said grimly, "that I got my hands on afore they managed to swarm me under. The skunks—they jumped me in my sleep!"

"No matter," Ward sighed gratefully, "you're here an' alive. How'd you get away from those devils? Where were they takin' you?"

The giant held a bloodstained knife into view in the moonlight. "I stole this from an Injun an' cut my ropes. Almost, I plunged it into the middle of your back. Thank the Lord I missed my first stroke!"

Ward swallowed hard as he stared at the bloodstained blade. It was plain that, in making his escape this night, Jack had cut more than the ropes at wrist and ankle. A redskinned guard had died in complete silence. Almost tasting the knife in his own back, Ward swallowed hard again.

"They was takin' me," Lesser said, "to furnish entertainment for the main camp. I'd've had my hands tied to a stake an' I reckon a fire built under my legs!"

Ward swore under his breath, then stiffened suddenly. "Hell! They've missed you. The camp's wakin' up!"

And, unmistakeably, there was a stir in the camp. It was no longer entirely asleep. They could hear an angry and querulous voice uplifted in a jumble of Piute curses.

Lesser whirled into the darkness, came back astride a barebacked mustang. "They're missin' me," he growled, "or this hoss from their remuda the other side of camp. C'mon, jump into your saddle. What was you plannin' to do with that herd?"

Ward looked at his partner with unsmiling eyes.

"Stampede 'em straight through the middle of that camp!"

Jack laughed softly. "Good boy! You was gonna make 'em pay for me, huh?" He cocked his head toward the rising turmoil in the camp. "Well, what th' hell we waitin' for? For a good stampede? Now's as good a time as any, pard!"

WARD'S heart leaped and sang as he sprang into the saddle and whirled toward the milling, small herd. He could have yelled, he was so happy, so wild and reckless. He suppressed the desire in favor of the more sudden and shattering surprise of the Indians at the roar of a stampede exploding upon them without warning from out of the dark. Gently, at first, and then with increasing pressure, he worked with Jack to get the steers on the move and then worked up to a trot.

"AIEE-E-E!"

The bush reverberates with the hunting cry of Ki-Gor, lord of the jungle! **Wah,** Great Simba slinks with tail to ground, while the little people of the forest shiver fearfully . . . and even the warrior-Masai turn ash-gray with fright! For mighty Ki-Gor has taken the war trail—the death blades will drink deep!

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Lunging their horses recklessly against the rear of the herd, at last, they broke the close-packed longhorned brutes out of their nervous trot into a thundering roar of a run. Only then, did Ward give vent from bursting lungs, to a screaming, yipping cowboy yell. He heard Jack's wolf-like howl and, ahead, dim cries of fright and helplessness. The next instant, the herd was exploding through the middle of the camp with the effect of stunning, detonating dynamite. All around, for a brief few seconds, were the horrible sounds of death and destruction, the rending crash of collapsing lodges, the screams and gibbering shrieks of agony of those trampled into red ruin in the dust. And through it all, Jack Lesser's howl of triumph.

THEY were through. The remuda of ponies beyond the village had been broken and scattered to the four winds in the dark and the raging remnants of the war-party had been left helplessly afoot. The camp was a red-trampled ruin.

High above that scene, withheld from their view by the dark, Ward and Jack

sat for a moment on the rim of the gulch, blowing their horses and listening to the tragic, thin howls which drifted up to their ears. Ward laughed and relaxed from the fierce tension which had been holding him.

"Well, hell, I'd be plumb happy now if I knew that El Escorpion was dead!"

Jack looked at him queerly in the dark and grunted a short, grim laugh. "Then," he said, "there's nothin' in the way of your joy. It was El Escorpion's own knife I stole for the purpose of cuttin' my wrist an' ankle ropes—an' his throat!"

The Benders—Kansas Killers

By S. STEVENS NEWTON

Blonde Kate Bender, dainty, soft-voiced, was a flower set amid the trackless plains. But woe to the traveler who lodged at her inn of death.

OUT on the vast and trackless plains of Kansas it was not often that one saw a young woman like Kate Bender . . . her delicate features, her blonde long hair, pouting lips, and delightfully curved body that invited the traveler who stopped at the inn to a night of delicious repose.

What luck that miles away from civilization a lonesome young man should find an inn with such a hostess!

The inn, which was also a grocery store,

was a hundred yards off the main trail that ran west and east. It was a single-room affair roughly divided into two rooms by a dark curtain.

As the traveler ate his supper and feasted his eyes on the girl, the back of his head touched the curtain that hung behind him.

To the watcher in the other room he was but a black silhouette.

Slowly the watching man raised a heavy hammer and then struck violently and with studied accuracy at the shadowy figure. The hammer descended through the curtain and he felt the skull of the traveler crack under the impact. It was a muffled sound like that of mashing ice.

The traveler lurched forward upon the table, his bulging eyes wise at the vision of eternal death.

In a split second Kate Bender had leaped forward. Her daintiness and lulling, murmuring voice fell from her like the rags of a beggar. Her soft arms rippled into mad strength.

She seized the mashed head of the victim as though she would caress it on her bosom. Her embrace was deadly.

One strong hand clutched at the long butcher knife and in a single stroke razored its keen edge through the throat of the dead stranger.

Her eyes were blazing and the delicate nostrils dilated in delight as they smelled the odor of human blood. It sent a thrill of exultation through the woman's whole quivering being.

Her curved bosom arose and fell in a sort of breathless ecstasy. Her deft fingers ran through the pockets of the victim searching out valuables.

The other Benders?

On the other side of the dimly lighted room the father and mother pushed aside a light cook stove that held down and concealed a trap door. Sullen John Bender emerged from another and laying aside his hammer aided his father to drag the limp body to the trap door and let it fall into the prepared pit.

Kate Bender looked the part of a witch as she counted the money.

There was a sound of footsteps on the outside porch as a customer entered the store. Instantly the girl recovered her composure. The money was slipped into her bodice. Deft fingers slipped into place the silky hair.

The evil spirit was gone and before the customer waiting in the country store appeared a smiling girl. The blood on her dress and hands was from killing chickens not many minutes before.

Kate Bender had slain her first victim.

Kansas was receiving its first taste of the orgies of the "Bloody Benders."

THE Benders had moved to Kansas early in 1871. The main trail west was full of moving people: explorers, army officers, travelers, reporters, prospectors, and farmers.

Where the Benders came from no one knew or even took the trouble to inquire. Nearby folks simply woke up one morning and realized that some hundred yards off the main trail near Morehead Station some strangers were putting up a house. A one-room house that was partitioned by dark curtains hung about.

The front of the house bore a single sign: GROCERIES.

The more observant were well pleased that the little farm boasted of a carefully tilled orchard.

During the night the mutilated body of the first victim was dragged from its putrid hole under the house and flung into a shallow pit in the orchard.

Even in broad daylight the carefully worked ground revealed no sign of the new grave.

Victim after victim was lured from the trail by the sign: GROCERIES. An inviting sign in the otherwise rather desolate country. And men who should have known better stayed to pay court to Kate under the sullen eyes of John Bender and the forfeit was their life.

And the only clue left by the victim may have been a new pin at the already tempting throat of Kate or possibly some strange money that John carried to town with which to buy supplies.

The belongings of the victims were sold to other travelers who carried them west to be swallowed up in the great movement of men there.

After two years a dull horror began to settle down over the community. How many victims were dumped into the odorous pit under the kitchen and then car-

ried at night into the orchard to be buried in a shallow grave will never be known.

But for two years the four Benders carried on their murderous plans and all the while horror arose with an increasing crescendo as searchers began to take the trail. But the Benders were wary and murdered only those who were from distant places so that safety was paradoxically dependent upon living close to the Benders.

The gloom that settled over the country was shot through and through with the venom of hatred and suspicion. Men began to look at each other in fear and doubt. And all the time a beautiful girl with blonde hair struck her gleaming and smiling fangs into unsuspecting victims like some delightful serpent.

But talk began to circulate about the Benders.

Now and again some intended victim would be seized with a feeling or overwhelming danger that would send him flying from the house with a tale of shivering fear.

But in 1873 the Benders murdered the wrong man. A certain Dr. York vanished. And his brother was not one to let the disappearance of his brother go unsolved if he could help it.

Colonel York traced his brother straight up to the store of the Benders. And there Kate Bender admitted that Dr. York had stopped there but had gone on his way.

Colonel York left unsatisfied.

But two weeks later the entire Bender family was missing. A neighbor who had driven over to visit them discovered that the family was not about. He likewise found a calf that had been tied to the barn dead from thirst. Other farm animals were perishing for lack of water also.

At first he started to investigate but a queer fright seized him after trying the front door and in spite of himself he fled in terror from the gloomy house.

The next day a group of men went back to the house and early in the week Colonel York broke into the deserted house. Everything was in confusion and gave evidence of a hasty flight. In the meantime it was learned that the Bender wagon had been found in a little town several miles away. The local station agent had sold them tickets.

The searching party found the floor bloody, piled with old rags and several bloody weapons. The table was filled with dirty dishes. The Benders had fled in haste.

The party located the trap door and when it was opened such a nauseating smell belched forth that no man would enter the pit until the house had been put on rollers and moved away.

No bodies were found in the pit but the blood-stained stones and soil revealed to what use the pit had been put.

The orchard and well-worked garden became the object of attention, for the preceding two weeks had been dry and all about could be seen cracks of about seven feet in length. These long cracks in the ground revealed the location of eight bodies in shallow graves.

The final destination of the Benders remains shrouded in mystery. The four Germans vanished into thin air. Before the murders were discovered they could have fled far.

Possibly they returned to Germany and settled down as quiet gardeners, respected and honored as they lived off their ill-gotten gains.

They may have turned west and somewhere out there repeated their assaults upon other unsuspecting victims until circumstances forced them again to move on.

It is just possible that Kate is still living, an old woman haunted by the memories of her youth and the once beautiful face and figure. She may have lived to bring up children and grandchildren who now, innocent of the past, venerate her as the finest mother and grandmother.

Long Rifles and Lobsterbacks

A Novelet of the Forest Runners

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

The forest held a trap to still the fifes and drums, and stain scarlet coats a deeper red.

THE spring evening was chill, and Carter Trelawny was well wrapped in his greatcoat as he hurried through the narrow streets of Schenectady. A patrol of Colonial militia went past at a brisk tread. Schenectady, stockaded outpost of civilization on the northwest frontier of York Province, had some of the quiet Dutch charm of Albany—but nevertheless its sentinels kept close watch! The border was uneasy.

Sentries had been doubled along the stockade at night for the past three weeks. The frontier was swarming with rumors, this spring of the year 1755, alive wtih reports that the French were raiding south from Montreal, and the inhabitants of Schenectady had never forgotten that flame-tipped night in 1690 when the French and Indians stormed

The whole forest seemed filled by a pungent mist of swirling powder smoke, and through it the painted warriors of the wilderness dashed with swinging hatchets and whirling death-mauls.

the city to lay all but two square blocks in blood-stained ashes.

Turning into a street a few blocks beyond the shadowed spire of St. George's Church, Trelawny stopped at the *Half Moon* tavern. Lamplight shone through the narrow panes of its leaded glass windows, and the sound of many voices came through the thick planks of the door. Warm air, and mingled smells, came out to meet Carter Trelawny as he pushed the portal open. The sharp scent of wood smoke was there, and the odor of cooking, mingled with the stench of sweating bodies and the smell of spilled ale. Trelawny muttered something savage under his breath and jerked the heavy door open. At the moment he meant to get drunk as quickly and thoroughly as he could.

Lupus Van Horn, a wealthy farmer over from Claverack, was standing in front of the big fireplace at one end of the crowded tap-room, delivering a loud-voiced lecture for the benefit of anyone who would listen. A round and bulky figure in faded blue broadcloth, puffing on a long clay church warden between sentences, Van Horn sent his deep voice booming out above the hum of conversation in the tap room.

"I say again, gentlemen, that these Colonies must have their own duly elected representatives in the Parliament in London! Taxation without proper representation is tyranny, an injustice that Englishmen cannot be expected to swallow. . . ."

Trelawny pushed his way through the crowd to the bar at the end of the tap-room. He was tall and lean, with a dark face and hooked nose inherited from his Cornish sea-rover ancestors, and at the moment his eyes were cold. Carter Trelawny had been closer to his father than are most men, and the old man's death had hit him hard. When Derek Staaden of the *Half Moon* set a pewter mug of ale in front of him, Trelawny pushed it aside and nodded toward a stone jug on the buffet behind the bar.

"Never mind the ale. Give me three fingers of Monongahela, Derek!" he said.

The tavern keeper filled a measure with the fiery brown liquor. "I was sorry to hear about your father, Carter," he said.

Trelawny's dark face did not change. "He had his heart set on returning to the old country for his last years, and the thing that really killed him was that court decision that gave the Cornwall estate to his cousin. It seems that we Colonials cannot get justice in His Majesty's courts!"

Young Trelawny's voice was rasping and grim. Staaden's eyes flickered warningly at a group of scarlet-coated British officers who sat at a nearby table. At that moment Lupus Van Horn's voice boomed out more loudly than ever as he reached the climax of his argument.

"I tell you, gentlemen, that the people of these Colonies will not endure the present oppression of the mother country for many years longer. Within our own generation, Parliament will have to give us what we want—or I don't know what will happen!"

"I'll tell you what will happen if they don't!" drawled a dry voice from somewhere across the room, "I'll tell you in one word—*war!*"

There was a sudden silence in the tap-room, a stillness that was dangerously tense. The crackling of the logs on the hearth seemed unnaturally loud. Then came the sudden scrape of a chair on the floor as one of the British officers jumped to his feet.

"Who said that?" he demanded hotly, but there was no answer. Derek Staaden pounded on the bar with an empty mug.

"Please, gentles, no quarreling in my tap room!" he rumbled, "There are still twenty years in which everything may be peacefully settled before that date of 1775 about which friend Van Horn is so worried. With the French pushing south and east again, we should think of the common enemy instead of fighting among ourselves. Come, gentles, a drink on the house for everyone!"

THE tension had passed, the tap room had returned to its normal atmosphere of confused geniality. Staaden wiped the sweat from his bald forehead and went on about his business. Trelawny crooked his finger to Staaden's colored boy to refill his glass of Monongahela, and then turned around to stand with his back against the bar, so

that he could look over the whole long reach of the tap room.

It was a motley crowd that was clustered there about the scarred tables, beneath the low beamed ceiling of the *Half Moon's* front room. About half of the patrons were solid burghers of Schenectady in broadcloth or fustian, the sort of men who would be seen in any similar tap room in Albany or New York or even Philadelphia, and there was a quartet of British officers in scarlet and gold. The rest were definitely men of the frontier. Forest-runners in fringed and beaded buckskin rubbed elbows with backwoods farmers in coarsely woven homespun. A pair of Oneida Indians sat cross-legged and motionless by the wall in a far corner. A little teamster whose face was hidden by his broad-brimmed hat sat hunched over a drink he held in one badly scarred hand, while his long whip was thrust in his boot. The whole motley crowd were talking all at once, banging their mugs on the tables as they talked, shaking long fingers under each other's noses as they drove a point home. The smoke was so thick that it filled the place with a bluish and strong scented haze.

Carter Trelawny was already beginning to feel the effects of the fiery liquor he was gulping down, and he steadied himself by leaning against the bar. However—not even the high-proof Monongahela whiskey could ease the grim bitterness that plagued his mind. Perhaps the courts in aloof and distant London had thought they were acting fairly when they gave the Trelawny estate to a cousin. Perhaps they had not meant to discriminate against a Colonial. But it had certainly looked that way!

The red-coated officers were talking together as they sprawled arrogantly in their chairs at the nearby table, and in a sudden lull the words of a young subaltern came clearly to Carter Trelawny's ears.

"That affair at Fort Necessity last summer proved that the Colonials make poor soldiers," he said. Trelawny's heavy black brows drew down in a sudden frown, and he carefully replaced his whiskey glass on the bar.

"Colonial troops can outfight the redcoats any time!" he said in sharp tones.

The subaltern looked up with an oath, and half rose from his chair. Then two of his fellow officers pulled him back, and the incident passed. A minute later Trelawny felt a heavy hand fall on his shoulder.

"Better guard your tongue, young feller," a vaguely familiar voice said quietly, "These military men have a powerful lot of authority nowadays."

CARTER TRELAWNY was tall, but the man who stood beside him was head and shoulders taller. He wore the fringed leather of a forest-runner, with hunting-knife and war-hatchet sagging from his wide belt, and his coonskin hat was rakishly askew. It was hard to tell the man's age. His unkempt hair was shot wtih gray, and his skin was so leathered and toughened that he might have been anywhere from forty to eighty.

"Name of Dave Ravenswood," the man said, and suddenly Trelawny realized why his dry voice was familiar. It was the one that had spoken from across the room a little while before, promising war if the treatment of the Colonies did not change. "Go ahead and get drunk if you like, young feller, since it's easy to see that it's what is in your mind, but don't go picking quarrels with men in uniform."

"All right," Trelawny said quietly. Ravenswood called for another drink, but after gulping it down he glanced around the tap room with a sudden grimace of distaste on his craggy face.

"Lord! I don't see how you folk can spend all your time in the settlements! Two days of them fill my stomach. Trapping's over for the year now, so I'm heading south where there's talk of more trouble in the Ohio country."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Another attempt to push the Monseers out of Fort Duquesne. I hear the King has sent General Braddock and two regiments of the Line to help the Colonial troops. Better come along."

For a moment Trelawny hesitated. In his present mood, he was tempted to leave everything behind and pull out with this gangling woodsman. Then he shook his head.

"I guess I'd better stay in Schenectady," he said.

II

AN hour later, Carter Trelawny knew that he had succeeded in getting drunk. A lot of other things were very hazy in his mind, but he was sure of that fact. As he walked across the tap room he had to hold tightly to chairs and tables to keep from falling. Most of the other patrons had gone, though the pair of painted Oneidas still sat impassive against the wall, and he saw the lanky figure of Ravenswood bent over a table as the frontiersman talked in low tones with a pair of homespun farmers. Then he stood alone in the back room.

This chamber was often used for private parties. There had evidently been one earlier in the evening, for an empty punch bowl stood in the middle of the table, and there were soiled mugs and tobacco ashes scattered about, but the room was deserted now. Fighting for control against the mists of darkness that were sweeping over him, Trelawny stood gripping the edge of the table, and then he looked up as one of the British officers came into the room. It was the young subaltern with whom he had nearly quarreled an hour before.

The officer himself had been drinking heavily, and he lurched as he came forward with a derisive sneer on his ruddy face.

"Zounds, if it isn't the young bumpkin who thought the Colonials can fight!" he muttered, "Damme, sir, I tell you to your face that you men of the provinces are a pack of cowards. . . ."

Trelawny struck out with all the power of his hundred and eighty pounds. Luck or fate guided his darting fist, and it struck squarely on the officer's jaw. The man went down with a crash; his head landing on the hearth, and the impetus of the blow threw Trelawny off balance so that he, too, went down. All the liquor he had drunk reached his brain then, and for a few moments he lost consciousness. . . .

Carter Trelawny knew that he could not have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, for the British officer was still stretched on the floor a few feet away. A wide-eyed and frightened teamster was peering in the door. Trelawny rose unsteadily to his feet, and shook his head to clear it, and not till then did he notice that a thin trail of blood was crawling away from the officer's head. He bent down beside the fallen man—and an instant later realized just what it was that he now faced. The subaltern was dead!

Half of the numbing cloak of drunkenness fell away from Trelawny then, and his legs were steady as he rose slowly to his feet. The officer's head must have been shattered when he struck the hearth as he fell.

"Lord!" Trelawny said, and gulped a few breaths of fresh air that was streaming in an open window. The teamster had vanished from the door, but now the tall figure of Ravenswood filled the portal.

"Quick!" the forest-runner muttered after a single glance, "Out that window. Hurry, man! Pull foot!"

"But . . . but I'd better wait," Trelawny said unsteadily. Ravenswood gripped him by the elbow and shoved him toward the window. The woodsman's voice was a low hiss.

"You young fool, don't you realize they'll hang you sure as hell for this? No plea of self-defense in a quarrel would ever save you after killing an officer. Hurry!"

Ravenswood half pushed him out the window, then swung his own long legs over the sill and slammed the casement shut behind them. It was pitch black outside, so that Trelawny could scarcely see six feet ahead of him, but the other man led the way down the alley back of the *Half Moon* with the sure steps of a man accustomed to the darkness. At the corner of a cross street he gave a low whistle, and the pair of Oneidas who had been in the tavern loomed up out of the blackness to fall in behind. They now had their rifles, and one of them handed Ravenswood his own long weapon.

Already Trelawny could hear a faint shouting from the direction of the tavern behind them.

"Where are we going?" he panted as

they twisted and turned through the narrow and less frequented streets.

"To get out of this town just as quickly as we can reach the stockade and scramble over!"

"But I'd better go home for my clothes. . . ."

"Don't you realize that's the first place the Provost would look for you?" Ravenswood snorted, "Nor are we trying any of the city gates. Bad news travels fast."

THEY stole at last between two houses, and across a strip of sparse grass, and then crouched in the shadows at the foot of the stockade. Starlight gleamed on the barrel of a sentry's musket some distance to the left, and they could see the fitful glow from another watchman's pipe fifty yards down to the right, but there was no one directly in front of them.

"Up and over the stockade!" Ravenswood whispered, "Quietly!"

One of the Oneidas leaped up to the firing step, swarmed to the top of the palisade, and then dropped catlike into the darkness beyond. Trelawny followed, aided by a shove from the other Iroquois, and then glanced up and back to see Ravenswood's tall figure momentarily silhouetted against the stars as he perched astride the serrated top of the log barrier.

The nearest sentry saw them then, and the night was split by a yellow flame from his musket a second after he roared out a tardy challenge. But the bullet went wide and the four of them trotted away in the night to the shelter of the forest beyond the clearing.

Halted in an open space beyond the edge of the trees, with the two Oneidas leaning impassively on their rifles, Carter Trelawny turned to the tall forest-runner.

"Reckon you saved my life," he said.

"Reckon I did," Ravenswood said cheerfully, "It's bad medicine to mess around with a redcoat officer. Well—Tryon County will be too hot to hold you now. Better come along with me after all, and see what's behind this talk of a summer campaign in the Ohio country."

"You've done a lot for a stranger," Trelawny said.

Ravenswood chuckled, and dropped his rifle into the curve of his left arm. "Not exactly a stranger, young feller. Your father was an old friend of mine. You don't remember me, but I recalled you, which is why I didn't want the Provost to hang you on Schenectady gallows. Well—they say General Braddock will have need of good riflemen, maybe we can make our fortunes in this campaign. Let's pull foot."

III

MANY weeks had passed on an afternoon in late spring when four men slid out of the woods along the east bank of Will's Creek, in the northwestern corner of Maryland Province, and stood looking across the stream toward the far shore.

Two of the quartet were dusky-skinned Iroquois, two were white men who wore the stained leather garments of forest-runners. They had come through the sea of underbrush to the east of the creek so deftly that there had been scarcely a ripple of leaves to mark their passing, and though they were now within sight of the strongest fortified post on the whole western frontier, they still kept their long rifles primed and ready. It was now early June, with parties of French voyageurs and their Algonquin allies drifting through the forest like deadly ghosts, and not even the presence of Major General Braddock and nearly four thousand men at Fort Cumberland made it safe for anyone to relax his vigilance when more than fifty yards from the fort.

Dave Ravenswood was his own tall and gawky self, with immensely long arms that hung nearly to his knees and his lantern jaw moving steadily as he chewed on a sassafras twig. He had once mentioned to Trelawny that one of his grandmothers had been a half-breed Onondaga Indian, and the Iroquois strain showed in the intent stare of his dark eyes at moments like this, as he peered fixedly across at the fort. At last he relaxed, and dropped his rifle into the curve of his arm, and spat out a bit of sassafras bark.

"Well," he drawled, "that's a right purty palisado they've erected over there. Must have taken a lot of axe work and elbow grease to build it. I'm glad I wasn't around!"

The two Oneida scouts also relaxed, shaking themselves like hunting dogs and muttering a few words to each other as they scuffed their moccasins at the river bank. They were painted for war now, with their shaven heads gleaming in the sun, and they looked far more at home then they had in the Schenectady tavern. The real change, however, was in the appearance of Carter Trelawny.

The first two days of ranging the forest behind Schenectady had torn Trelawny's broadcloth suit to a shredded wreck, but after that they had stopped at an isolated farm where a settler had sold him an outfit of fringed buckskin. It still looked a lot newer than Ravenswood's battered garments, but it now showed some signs of wear. Pack-straps had worn the leather black at the shoulders, and the trailing thrums were filled with burrs. Trelawny had gradually taken on a certain hardness of face and litheness of movement during these past weeks of roaming the woods, an appearance similar to that of his companion. He had often noticed that all forest-runners seemed cast in the same mold. The deep woods had a way of putting their mark on all men who haunted those shadowy depths. They learned to conform to type—or they did not survive.

"You'll do, young feller," Ravenswood drawled, glancing at him with a twisted smile. "You came through that last thicket without a crack of twig or riffle of leaf, as smoothly as I can myself."

FORT Cumberland stood on the high ground across the stream, built on the triangular bluff where Will's Creek ran into the north branch of the Patomack. The stockade was about four hundred feet long and over a third as wide; built of heavy logs spiked together and pierced for musketry. The brazen muzzles of cannon peered out through occasional embrasures. High on a staff above the western end of the fort, the red ensign of Britain hung flashing in the spring sunshine, and off to the westward was an occasional flash of scarlet where close-locked companies of regular troops were drilling on the level plain.

"So at last the Lords in London send troops of the Line to defend the frontier!" Trelawny said. Ravenswood spat another piece of bark.

"Aye! And I'm wondering just how effective they'll really be, in the kind of fighting they must do between here and the Monseer posts at Duquesne and Venango! Fighting a mob of Indians and *cour-du-bois,* sniping from behind trees, isn't the same as facing neat platoons of the French Guards on the field of Fontenoy."

"You're just a born pessimist!" Trelawny grinned, and turned to the stream. They all splashed through the ford of the creek, and then strode up the far bank with the water dripping from the trailing thrums of their leggins.

At the western end of the stockade of Fort Cumberland, the sally-port stood open while a pair of sentries from the Forty-fourth Foot Regiment marched up and down with their muskets shouldered. Their white cross-belts and black gaiters gleamed, their faces were as stiff and expressionless as though they stood on guard at some palace in London. They were very picturesque in their scarlet and gold, but there was something incongruous about all that finery.

"He'd make a fine target at a hundred paces, at that!" Trelawny muttered, staring at the nearest sentry.

The old frontiersman shrugged. "Aye—and I tell ye that these Redcoats would be just stubborn enough to march into battle in a stiff formation. Generals and such are powerful slow to learn, I've found. If they'd only change those scarlet coats for something the color of these buckskin clothes of ours, something that would blend with the scenery, they might save a lot of lives before this campaign is over."

SOME thirty or forty wagons were parked in front of the fort, each with its team of horses fastened to the rear axle. The driver of one of them, a thick-chested young man with a square and freckled face, was sprawled on the driver's seat with his stubborn jaw moving

steadily as he chewed the end of a willow twig. He wore a checked holland shirt, leather hunting breeches, and a broad-brimmed hat that had two bullet holes in the crown. He looked indolent and half asleep, but after one glance at the pair of woodsmen swinging up the slope he suddenly came to life and leaped down from his perch.

"Dave Ravenswood, you old hellion!" he barked. The gaunt frontiersman grinned all over his weathered face as he held out his hand.

"Hi, Dan'l. Glad to see you. Shake hands with Jack Bland here. 'Tween you and me, it ain't really his name, but it's safer right now. Younker, this is Dan'l Morgan, the best teamster in this part of the country and the best two-fisted, rough-an'-tumble fighter between Canady and the Georgias."

"Pshaw, Dave," Morgan said, "There may be a beter scrapper somewhere. It's possible. I ain't found him yet, though!"

"What's that piece of paper over there?" Ravenswood suddenly asked, his sharp eyes noticing some kind of handbill tacked to one of the logs to the left of the sallyport.

"Notice of a reward for some feller wanted for a killin'," Morgan shrugged, "Name of Trelawny, or something of the sort. Seems like he killed a redcoat officer up in York province somewhere. He's not likely to be down this way, of course, but a bailiff put that up this morning."

Ravenswood's leathered face did not change its expression. Trelawny, not as sure of his own self-control, bent over to pluck some burrs from his leggins lest this teamster read the truth in his eyes. Bad news had traveled fast!

TRELAWNY straightened up with a sigh. After all, he was not in much danger. Only a few people had known him in the *Half Moon* that fatal night, and there was little chance that any of them had drifted all the way down here to Fort Cumberland. But he supposed that it would always be like this for the rest of his life. Always a hunted man, always using some name other than his own, always afraid to stay in any one place for too long. It seemed a heavy price to pay for a single mistake, an accident that had been only half his fault!

Most of the other teamsters were hanging around their wagons, tending the horses or making some minor repairs, or else simply loafing. Glancing idly around, Trelawny noticed that a short teamster in charge of a mud-splashed wagon was staring at him with a peculiar intentness. The fellow turned and walked quickly away as soon as Trelawny caught his eye, but the expression of his wrinkled face had been a queer blend of fear and recognition.

"Do you know who that man is?" Trelawny asked quietly.

Morgan shook his head. "Never saw him before. Must be some new harness-bug that just pulled in with the latest draft of wagons."

A sudden racket of drums came from inside the stockade of the fort. Many drums were rolling all together, the thudding thunder of the cowhide lifted by the shrill notes of the fifes. There was a flash of scarlet and gold in the sallyport. The field music came first, the double rank of drummers wielding their sticks in perfect unison, and then rode Sir Peter Halkett with Lieutenant-colonel Gage and their staffs. Their drawn swords flashed in the sun. Behind them, in close-locked scarlet ranks with white cross-belts gleaming and muskets all sloping in flawless alignment, came the splendidly trained and disciplined troops of His Majesty's Forty-fourth Regiment.

As they went past with their brisk and rhythmic tread, bayonet sheaths and accouterments slapping against their thighs, Dan'l Morgan thrust his hands deep in his pockets and shifted the willow twig from one corner of his wide mouth to the other.

"Aye, there they march. Disciplined troops of the Line!" he said, and there was a half sneer on his square face. His brown eyes seemed to hold cloudy flecks of gold. "And Colonel Dunbar's Forty-eighth Regiment is cast in the same mold. By Heaven, they cannot seem to realize that this wild Ohio country is not the plain of Fontenoy! Or that the forests of the Alleghenies are different from the neat fields of Europe. General Brad-

dock insists he can fight the French along the Monongahela in the same way as he did at Fontenoy—and I say that such fool ideas are like to be the death of us all!"

"Then why don't you stay at home?" asked a quiet voice behind them. It was a man in civilian clothes, one of the two doctors attached to the Colonial troops serving with Braddock's army. The stocky teamster looked up with a sudden smile.

"Eh, Doctor Mercer, now you ask a question!" he drawled, "I reckon it's because I'm afraid I might miss a good fight!"

IV

DRUMS sounded again, fewer drums with a less flawlessly uniform beat, and another regiment came out behind the Forty-fourth. These men wore uniforms of a different color, blue uniforms with red facings, but they differed from the troops of the Line in more than the color of their tunics. Their step was ragged and uneven, their muskets sloped at a dozen angles, and they marched with an easy and bent-legged stride that was far removed from the stiff precision of the regulars. These were Virginia and Maryland troops, Colonial forces raised by the provincial governments.

Carter Trelawny looked thoughtfully at the brawny Colonial troops, and then he began to smile. They might lack polish, these men from the frontier settlements and colonial towns, but their eyes were alert and their wide shoulders had a self-reliant swing. After all, there was more to warfare than the ability to keep a straight line.

"They look mighty good to me," he said, and Dan'l Morgan nodded agreement.

"They'll do!"

It seemed that not everyone agreed. A pair of young British officers had moved up alongside them, a few feet away, and one of them suddenly laughed aloud as they watched the marching Colonials.

"Look to the country bumkins!" he said, and his companion began to chant derisively under his breath:

"Hay foot, straw foot!
Hay foot, straw foot!
Come on, you farmers,
Time to get the cows!"

Morgan the teamster spun around with an oath, heavy fists clenched. Trelawny instinctively thrust out one arm to stop him, but it was gaunt Dave Ravenswood who stepped forward and thrust his hawk-like nose within a few inches of the face of the nearest startled Britisher.

"Harkee, young popinjay!" he growled, "This is a different world, over here across the water. A score of those stout lads with rifles could stand off a hundred of your red-coated dummies."

The British officer went red in the face from anger. He half drew his sword from its scabbard, and Ravenswood instantly flicked his polished war hatchet from its sheath. Trelawny and Doctor Mercer both leaped forward to stop them, for Dan'l Morgan was simply grinning at the prospects of a good fight, but then a tall officer in Colonial blue came running up to stand between the forest-runner and the furious Redcoat.

"Come, gentlemen!" he protested, "We'll all have our fill of fighting before this campaign is over."

"This insolent lout should be flogged!" the young Britisher raged.

"I'll kill the man who tries it!" Ravenswood snapped.

A faint smile creased the heavy and pock marked face of the tall Virginian officer. "We don't treat free citizens that way in the Colonies, Leftenant," he said, "I trust you will oblige me by forgetting the whole incident. I will be glad to mention your forbearance to General Braddock. Shall we walk back to the fort together?"

WHEN the officers had gone, the tall Virginian shepherding the pair of redcoats before him, Dave Ravenswood spat in the dust, and then slid his war hatchet back into its beaded sheath. As his weathered face lost the grimness of anger, Trelawny realized how clearly the man's quarter-breed Indian blood showed in his implacable black eyes in moments of stress. Now Ravenswood began to fill a short pipe with crumbs of tobacco scraped from the bottom of a leather pouch.

"I'll clip his comb for that gilded young

fool if he ever comes near me again!" he muttered.

"And get shot for your pains!" Trelawny said shortly. He turned to the teamster. "Who was that Colonial officer?"

"Oh, that's Colonel Washington," Morgan shrugged. "He comes from some plantation down beyond Williamsburg. Led the expedition that had to surrender Fort Necessity to the Monseers last summer. He's on Braddock's staff now, and I don't envy him his job!"

Doctor Mercer had gone down toward the log-walled hospital of the fort, and the two woodsmen walked up to the sally-port with Morgan.

"It's in my mind that I'm going to be in a fracas with one of these young redcoats before I'm out of this place," Ravenswood said thoughtfully.

Trelawny grunted. "Keep your temper in check, Dave, or you'll get yourself in a spot like I am," he said.

Trelawny had spoken carelessly, forgetting that Dan'l Morgan was within hearing. At the moment they were directly beside the printed broadside that offered a reward of four pounds for the arrest of that Carter Trelawny of Schenectady who was wanted for murder. The stocky teamster looked at the broadside, and looked again at Trelawny, and then grinned.

"I'll give you two wood-ticks a bit of good advice," Dan'l Morgan said, "Report to Colonel Washington, and get assigned as scouts, and then pull away from this fort and stay away till the army actually marches. If you stay in the fort, somebody else may read that broadside and start thinking, but once on the trail they'll be too busy to worry about it."

"Thanks," Trelawny said.

HEAVY dew dripped from the eaves of the log buildings inside the stockade of Fort Cumberland, as the eastern sky began to grow pale for the dawn next day, and the wet logs of the palisade gleamed in the starlight. The lagging scrape of a sentry's weary tread on the firing step mingled with the usual night-noises of the forest that still drifted across the raw clearing surrounding the fort. It is chill in the Alleghenies in that bleak hour just before dawn, even in spring, and the drowsy sentinels blew on their chilled hands. A faint scent of wood smoke had begun to drift from the chimney of one of the cooking sheds.

Awakening on the floor in the corner of an unused commissary shack, Carter Trelawny yawned and sat up. He ran his hands through his shaggy hair for a moment, then threw aside the blanket and rose silently upright. A faint sheen of starlight came in the open door of the shed. On bare feet, Trelawny padded across the splintery puncheon floor to a wooden water bucket that stood by the door. He drove the last sleep from his eyes by plunging his whole head into the pail, then shook the loose water from his hair like a dog coming out of a stream. Ravenswood was already up, perched on one leg in the darkness like a gaunt crane as he pulled on his other moccasin, and outside the door Trelawny caught a flash of starlight on rifle barrels as the two Oneidas stole up with their weapons at the trail.

In the first gray light they stole out the sally-port of the fort, while scarlet-coated sentries stared curiously at the buckskin-clad rangers who plodded silently into the thinning mist with long thrums tossing on sleeves and leggins. The two Oneidas moved out on either flank without command. Cradling his rifle in the hollow of his left arm as he marched, Carter Trelawny opened the pan and blew out the powder. The night mist might have spoiled it. He pulled the nipple of his powder-horn with his teeth, filled the pan anew with the shining black grains, and made sure that the flint was firmly set before shifting the weapon to an easier carrying position.

A little way beyond the edge of the forest they came to an Indian path. It was a narrow trail through the moss, several inches deep, worn by the moccasins of unnumbered generations. The leading Iroquois saw it first, holding up his hand in signal to halt and then squatting on his heels beside the trail to examine the tracks.

"Delaware," he whispered, pointing to a print that was clearer than the rest, "Several days old. Before the last rain."

It was not merely the fear of possible French and Algonquin raiding parties that held them all silent as they pushed on once more. The forest itself seemed to breed

silence. In its shadowy depths no sunlight ever struck down through the thick canopy of leaves. These trees had been growing since long before man ever came to this western continent. Their trunks formed a dense series of Gothic arches under which the light was dim and murky. The painted shapes of the Oneidas were like shadows as they went forward on silent moccasins. Once, when Trelawny's powder-horn rattled against the stock of his rifle for a moment, the sound seemed very loud and the tall Iroquois in the lead threw him a warning glance.

They halted and lit a small fire just before dusk, building the tiny blaze from carefully selected dry twigs that would give the minimum of smoke and drenching the embers with water from a stream as soon as they had finished cooking. Then they moved a mile away before rolling up in their blankets for the night.

"I doubt if there are any Monseers this close to the fort," Ravenswood said, "but the best way to keep your hair is to never take no chances at all."

WRAPPED in his blanket as they lay on the moss in a small clearing with one of the Oneidas standing the first watch, staring drowsily up through a gap in the trees at the Pleiades which the Iroquois called the Seven Oneida Dancers, Trelawny began to understand the fascination that the deep woods held for men like Ravenswood. Life in the forest required constant caution and endless vigilance if a man was to survive, but at least it was far removed from the jealousies and cross-currents that complicated life in the settlements. He was content.

"In what province are we now?" he whispered. Ravenswood's drowsy whisper came through the darkness.

"Lord knows! Nobody knows the boundaries of this Ohio country. Virginia claims most of it, Pennsylvania disputes that, and the Frenchies at Duquesne* and Venango† try to claim the whole area for the King of France."

"Do you think this whole area will ever be really settled?"

"Too big," Ravenswood muttered sleepily, "There'll never be anything but a few scattered forts west of the Alleghenies. I'm going to sleep."

For long days on end they ranged the forests, dodging French scouting parties, spying out the enemy strength. Once they even lay hid in a clump of bracken within sight of the log stockade of Fort Duquesne, where the white and gold banner of France floated from the staff, and tried to count the numbers of men going in and out. At intervals they reported back to the army which was moving sluggishly northwest from Fort Cumberland. Burdened by its train of wagons, trying to cut a wide road through the wilderness as it marched, Braddock's force was making only a few miles a day. The General was elated at the report of the comparatively small French garrison holding Duquesne.

"My only fear is that they may not even wait to fight us at all!" he said on hearing Ravenswood's report. Colonel Washington, the Virginian officer serving on Braddock's staff, looked dubious.

"The French are clever at handling their Indian allies, General," he warned, "A few hundred Algonquins entrenched behind trees. . . ."

"That's all right, Colonel," Braddock interposed patronizingly, "You've never seen troops of the Line in battle before. No amount of painted savages can ruffle them."

Washington shrugged and was silent, but his grave eyes were thoughtful and worried.

V

THEY rejoined the army again on the twenty-fifth of June, while it was camped at Great Meadow, by the ruined and already half overgrown trenches of abandoned Fort Necessity. All that afternoon Trelawny had noticed that Dave Ravenswood was in a strange mood, with his usual dry humor lacking and his dark eyes distantly somber. As soon as they hit camp he hunted up a teamster to borrow half a jug of whiskey, and after that Trelawny did not see him again until late that evening.

It was near the second watch of the night, and most of the camp was asleep. Trelawny sat by a small fire with Colonel Washington, and Doctor Mercer, and Mor-

*Now Pittsburgh.
†Now Franklin, Pa.

gan the teamster and a few others, when the gaunt forest-runner suddenly loomed up out of the darkness. Ignoring their greetings, he sat cross-legged close to the fire and stared into the embers, but when there came a pause he suddenly spoke.

"My grandmother was Oye-na-kisuni, sachemess of the Onondaga and keeper of the Council Fire in the Long House!" he said tonelessly. "Her blood is strong in me tonight. Before she died, she taught me to read the future in the smoke. What would you hear?"

"Sounds like drunken wandering to me," Morgan said, "But go ahead. Tell me where I'll be in about twenty years."

From under his hunting shirt Ravenswood brought out a small leather bag that Trelawny had never seen before. The woodsmen threw a pinch of gray powder on the embers, and a sudden cloud of strangely smelling smoke came drifting up. They were all silent now, and even Dan'l Morgan had ceased to smile. For a few minutes Ravenswood muttered to himself in the Onondaga dialect. Then he moved one hand slowly through the smoke, and his voice was once more flat and utterly toneless.

"I see many men marching, Dan'l Morgan," he said. "They all wear leather hunting shirts with the thrums stained green, and you lead them to follow a strange flag. Then I see you at a place called the Cowpens, where the redcoats break in red ruin and your bayonets sweep the field. The stars of a general are on your shoulders."

"Sounds like treason, Dan'l," Mercer said softly.

Ravenswood's eyes flickered toward the doctor as he moved his hand through the smoke once more.

"I SEE you on a frozen winter road near a place called Princeton, Doctor," he said. "Medicine is forgotten, for you wear a blue and buff uniform, and the stars of a general are on your faded epaulettes. There are bloody footsteps on the snow that your men have crossed during the night, but as they go storming forward I see you stretched under an oak beside a frozen stream. Men are gathered about you."

"And I?" asked Colonel Washington.

Ravenswood was utterly motionless except for the one hand that groped claw-like through the scented smoke. His voice droned on.

"I see you leading a lost cause through weary years, when hope is dead and only your own stubborness carries it on. The roll of your defeats is a long and heavy one, but there is sunlight and peace at the end.

"Are there any others who would read the future? Speak quickly, for the hour of sight is nearly at an end."

Gold braid flashed in the firelight as a pair of British officers stepped forward. Trelawny, rising quickly to his feet and stepping back so that his own face remained in shadow, recognized Lieutenant-colonel Gage accompanied by General Braddock himself. Ravenswood threw another pinch of the gray powder on the embers, and groped quickly through the curling smoke. His strange eyes turned toward Gage.

"The future holds a lot for you, redcoat!" he droned, "I see you in supreme command of all British troops in the Americas. But your star begins to set when you send troops to a pair of hamlets called Lexington and Concord, and I see the finest troops in your army lying in bloody windrows on the slopes of Bunker Hill."

"Fiddlesticks!" Gage muttered, but his tone lacked conviction. Braddock smiled patronizingly as he took a step forward.

"And what of my future, rifleman?" he asked.

Ravenswood's eyes narrowed as he peered through the thinning smoke.

"I see men moving by night, in haste and in fear. I see wagons driven hastily over a mound of fresh earth in the center of a wilderness trail. I see . . ."

Abruptly Ravenswood's voice ceased. One swift thrust of his moccasined foot scattered the remaining embers and put an end to the fire. Then he rose wearily to his feet.

"I can see no more. The hour of sight has passed. *Hiro*—I have spoken!" he said, and stalked off into the darkness.

RAVENSWOOD did not reappear until dawn, when the scouts moved out ahead of the army once more. He looked tired, and his eyes were bloodshot, but

otherwise he was once again his old self.

"Indian mummery, young feller!" he said when Trelawny mentioned his performance by the campfire the night before. "Those odd spells come over me once in a while. I don't recollect anything of last night's affair, myself."

With a few other scouting parties, they covered the front as the army crawled sluggishly forward. It was shortly after dawn on the ninth of July, a misty dawn when the moist earth steamed with the promise of intense heat for the coming day, that Trelawny and Ravenswood lay hid in a thicket beyond the clearing of Fort Duquesne. They were watching white-uniformed French soldiers changing the guard along the stockade.

"The army'll be here before night!" Trelawny whispered, but Ravenswood was plucking dubiously at his lower lip.

"Aye—perhaps. If something doesn't happen first. These Monseers are a shrewd lot, far wiser in the ways of frontier fighting than General Braddock, and it will be a miracle if they simply let us march up to the gates of the fort without striking some kind of a blow first. Well—let's pull foot."

They edged backward thorugh the bushes till they were well away from the clearing, and the pair of flanking Oneidas had slipped through the thicket to join them. The shorter Iroquois, a young warrior of the Wolf Clan named Red Otter, touched a freshly taken Delaware scalp that now hung from his belt.

"One of the Lenape was skulking along our flank," he said in the Oneida dialect, "He hunts no more."

"I didn't hear anything," Trelawny said. Red Otter smiled, and touched the long knife at his hip.

"This makes no noise," he said.

The scalp had Delaware braidings. So the Leni Lenape marched with the French! Born and bred on the northwest frontier, Trelawny knew well enough what that would mean. He saw Ravenswood's craggy face go grim.

"Our fancy general has certainly succeeded in making enemies of most of the Indians who might have been friends!" he muttered, "It is in my mind. . . ."

They had been moving up a rock-strewn slope, and the words suddenly died in Ravenswood's throat as Red Otter in the lead flung out one arm in a gesture of warning and then threw himself flat on his face. His tense, motionless body carried a soundless warning. As the others crawled cautiously up beside him, looking over the crest of a long slope, they saw nothing at all. Then a single Indian stalked out from between the trees.

HE was painted for war, in stripes of red and yellow, and his rifle was at the trail. He glanced around him once, then glided out of sight beyond a willow thicket. Another followed him, and a third, and then a whole group all together. A minute later the whole trail was filled with a densely packed column of Indians treading steadily southward. A few Frenchmen were with them—*cour-du-bois* in fringed leather. There were hundreds of them, but not even the soft pad of their moccasins was audible a few yards up the slope, and after a while they vanished as quietly as they had come. Their route led toward the slow-moving and cumbersome army of General Braddock.

"Algonquins and Delawares!" Trelawny muttered in a faint whisper, "My trigger finger itched."

"You'd have only killed us all, firing on a horde like that!"

For a long time after the raiders had passed they held their places without moving, and at last Ravenswood rose lithely to his feet.

"Come!" he said, "They're between us and the army, so we'll have to circle to get around them—and they travel fast!"

For half the day they traveled, swinging in a vast circle to get around the raiding party, moving at a steady trot for hours on end. Trelawny's sweat-soaked hunting shirt clung to his chest, and the breath hissed hot between his teeth. He would have given a lot to have stopped for more than one of their very brief halts, but there were vast powers of resistance in Ravenswood's lanky frame and the two Oneida were tireless.

Trelawny knew that they must be nearing the army from their general location, and at last Ravenswood halted and flung up his arm. For a moment they all leaned panting on their weapons. They could hear the soft swish of the leaves, and the mur-

mur of a nearby stream, but over it all sounded a dull thudding that gradually swelled and grew to a crashing and rhythmic thunder.

"Drums!" Trelawny said.

"Aye—drums!" Ravenswood echoed bitterly, "They are only a little away from the enemy, but they march like belled cattle, with a noise that can be heard by any Frenchman within miles. I tell you, lad, the Lords of London will never be able to govern this side of the water properly until they come to an understanding of this country, as well as of its people."

They reached the trail a little later, just as the advance was passing. A few guides went first, and a small detachment of the Light Horse, and then the main body of the advance guard. Scarlet uniforms flamed against the trees. Gold braid flashed in the occasional beams of sunlight that struck down through gaps in the leaves.

After the second crossing of the creek at noon, Braddock had paraded his men through drill manoeuvers on a level plain before turning them up the wooded slope that led toward Duquesne. Now they marched along this wilderness road with all the stiffness and protection of troops on a parade ground. There was something bizarre about all that rigid formality against the tangled background of the wilderness, something fantastic, and yet Trelawny found his blood kindling at the sight of those steadily marching files.

"They make a brave show!" he said. Ravenswood waited perhaps half a minute before replying.

"Aye," he said at last, his voice gloomy, "they are good to look at. But I am worried. Those British regulars are probably the best trained troops in the world—but I think that too much of that stiff sort of training takes something out of a man. Something of initiative and resourcefulness. I am afraid that these men will be useless if they run into some kind of a situation that has not been thought of and taught by their officers. I don't like it. Call it a heritage from my Indian grandmother if ye like, but I feel that there is a doom upon us!"

The troops of the king continued to flow past along the trail like a river of flesh and steel, but Carter Trelawny suddenly shivered inside his sweat-soaked hunting shirt.

VI

THE two forest-runners stepped out into the trail when Braddock came along with his staff. The General did not draw rein as he received their report, letting them walk beside him as he rode, and as Ravenswood finished his tale of the French and Indian raiding party they had passed, the ruddy-faced officer nodded briefly.

"My thanks. Take post in the column," he said, and turned his face to the fore again.

Dave Ravenswood's lantern jaw sagged open as he gaped upward at the mounted officer. "But ain't you going to send out more patrols, General?" he gasped.

Braddock shrugged. "What if there are a few hundred Indians waiting for us to come along? One volley from the advance guard will take care of those savages."

For a long moment Ravenswood stared at the army's commander, at the man who held the immediate destiny of nearly two thousand men in his hands. Then, without another word, the gaunt frontiersman shouldered his long rifle and turned away. Trelawny glanced back at the bunched officers of the general's staff for an instant, but on only one face did he see anything but a bland approval of Braddock's attitude.

The one exception, even as his somber blue uniform stood out against the scarlet and gold of the other staff officers, was Colonel Washington. His heavy featured face was troubled, but he had the appearance of a man who had given up a hopeless struggle to change conditions beyond his power to alter. As Trelawny turned away to follow his companion, he instinctively made sure that the flint of his rifle was firmly seated.

The trail was leaving the comparatively open ground of the rising slope that had led away from the creek, and was leading into a region of thick woods and dense underbrush, the whole broken by scattered ravines. The thick and gloomy shade of the forest stilled what little talking there had been among the men, so that there was no sound but the steady tramp of feet and rattle of equipment. The pair of woodsmen worked their way up to the head of the advance guard, where a young subaltern turned to them with a puzzled frown

sitting his pink and perspiring face.

"I say," he asked, "can you tell me why it is that. . . ."

Whatever question the young officer had been about to ask was never uttered, for a leaden slug droned through the air to catch him square in the throat. The crashing report of the rifle shot came a split second later, and—on the edge of a ravine to the right—a puff of white powder smoke blossomed out like some strange and deadly flower.

IT was a moment that Carter Trelawny was never to forget, a tableau that was permanently etched on his memory. The marching ranks of infantrymen silhouetted against the wall of underbrush . . . the Light Horse lounging in their saddles a little way ahead . . . the young officer already starting to fall from his mortal wound—and Dave Ravenswood's lanky form crouching for a leap to the shelter of the nearest tree. Then, as though that first shot had been a signal, the whole rim of the ravine vomited flame and smoke.

Bullets sang through the air like a storm of raging wasps, clipping leaves and twigs from the trees as they came and then thudding into the close-locked ranks of the advance guard with the terribly unforgettable sound of lead against flesh. Ravenswood took shelter behind the nearest tree in a headlong dive, Trelawny was only a split second behind him. Both of them flung their rifles to their shoulders, and fired at the painted shapes dimly visible along the edge of the ravine. As he hastily reloaded, Ravenswood shouted to the officer commanding the advance guard:

"Have your men take to the trees! Don't let them stand there like cattle!"

For an instant the British officer stared down at the frontiersman, his face gone grim and his eyes uncertain. Then he shook his head and faced about to his men. The scarlet clad troops remained in their even ranks along the wilderness road, firing by platoon into the thickets and the cluster of underbrush along the ravine. The crash of their volleys was like the pounding of a giant surf, and a dun mist of powder smoke swirled waist deep about them.

Carter Trelawny neglected to fire his own rifle as he stared back over his shoulder at the men of His Majesty's Forty-fourth Foot Regiment. The sight was fascinating—and yet horrible. The scarlet ranks stood straight and even, and muskets rose and fell together in response to the commands of the officers. Ramrods whirred in the barrels with perfect unison as a platoon reloaded, and a brisk rattle of snapping pan-covers ran up and down each line. But—they were dropping by scores with every passing second, shot down by hidden foemen they could not see, while their own blind volleys were wasted on the masking curtain of underbrush.

A KICK and an oath from Ravenswood brought Trelawny back to his own situation, and he began to fire at the flashes along the edge of the ravine. The whole line of underbrush was blanketed in a mist of smoke through which the flames of the discharges spat sullenly. Colonel Sir Peter Halkett of the Forty-fourth was already lying dead in the trail beside his slain horse, and the little detachment of scarletcoated cavalry had gone down to a man.

Trelawny fired with an oath on his lips as a painted Delaware bounded out from the shelter of the bushes, his knife flashing in the sun as he scalped a fallen cavalryman. He missed, but Ravenswood fired a split second later and the Indian dropped across the body of his victim. With a thin-lipped and mirthless smile, his hands moving with incredible speed, the forest-runner flipped his hunting knife from its sheath and cut a fresh notch in the stock of his rifle and replaced the knife in its sheath again.

The situation was swiftly changing. Most of the officers who had commanded the advance were down, and the scarlet ranks were broken at last. The surviving men huddled together like cattle on the road, their eyes staring and their muskets pointing in all directions, while the pitiless leaden hail from the concealed attackers still struck down man after man.

The thing that Ravenswood had feared had come to pass. These troops had met a situation for which neither their training nor their tactics had fitted them, and the skirmish was turning into a massacre.

"Let's get out of here!" Ravenswood

muttered, his mouth full of wadding as he reloaded in furious haste. "This can end in only one way!"

Even as Ravenswood spoke, the thing happened. They broke! Caught helpless in an ambush, lacking all knowledge of wilderness fighting that would have let them stop the slaughter and hit back, human nerves could stand no more. The survivors of the ill-fated advance guard fled back up the trail in a headlong rout, with eight hundred wild-eyed Indians and a handful of Frenchmen yelping at their heels.

Ravenswood and Trelawny, and a few other scouts, and a pair of stolid Maryland militiamen who had somehow strayed ahead of their command, covered the retreat as best they could. They fought as the Indians did, darting from tree to tree and keeping constantly under cover, but they were too few to have any effect. Falling back steadily from one tree to the next, often reloading on the run as he retreated, Trelawny was in time to see the chaos that took place when the fleeing and hopelessly demoralized remnant of the advance ran into the main body.

HEAVY though the casualties had been, with the brightly clad troops in the open road forming perfect targets for their concealed opponents, the slaughter of the advance guard had only taken a few minutes. The main body was just forming line-of-battle when the fleeing survivors ran squarely into them. In an instant the two commands became intermingled, and the panic began to spread to the fresh troops. They began to break formation.

"Stand firm! Stand and fight like men!" Braddock shouted in a mighty voice, spurring his horse forward, but a heavy volley crashed out from the thicket and the General's mount faltered in midstride. The shrill Delaware scalp yell was sounding ever more loud as the painted raiders slipped ghost-like through the trees and pressed in upon the doomed command.

Off to the right of the trail, Waggoner's company of Virginia troops had taken cover among the trees at the first fire and was holding the attack away from that flank. Then, as they fell back toward the main body under press of numbers, the demoralized and panic-stricken men of the Forty-eighth mistook their blue uniforms and met them with a point-blank volley. Colonel Washington and a few other officers ran along the line to strike the musket barrels aside, but more than half of Waggoner's company lay dead from the fire of the men they had tried to protect.

That was the last straw! The only units that remained organized and effective were decimated by the fire of their own allies. All semblance of order was gone. Men threw aside their muskets and ran. Teamsters cut the traces and abandoned their wagons as they galloped to the rear. Despairing officers tried in vain to halt the yelling mob of fugitives, riderless horses galloped amid the throng. The whole forest seemed filled by a pungent mist of swirling powder smoke, and through it the painted warriors of the wilderness darted with swinging hatchets and whirling death-mauls. The army, the gallant array that had been marching along this forest road with drums beating and fifes playing only fifteen minutes before, was a beaten and fleeing horde of fugitives.

CARTER TRELAWNY had fired and reloaded and fired again till the barrel of his rifle grew hot to the touch. Twice he had refilled his horn by taking the powder of men who lay dead beside the trail. Together with Ravenswood, whose eyes were like chips of smoky flint and who cursed tonelessly and steadily through clenched teeth, he joined up with the shattered remnant of Waggoner's Virginians who still kept in the rear. Looking up once as another man crawled across to the fallen tree behind which he and Ravenswood happened to be sheltered at the moment he recognized Morgan.

"Where's your team and wagon, Dan'l?" Ravenswood asked Morgan with a mirthless grin.

"God knows, and I don't care," the stocky teamster muttered, his shoulder jerking to the shock of the recoil as he fired. Somewhere nearby a pair of ragged drums were beating the retreat, the formal acknowledgement that the battle was lost.

VII

EDWARD BRADDOCK had been a stubborn and unreasonable man, but he had no lack of courage. With three horses already shot under him, he sat grimly in the saddle of a fourth by the side of the trail as he watched the shattered wreck of his army stream past. Only the oft-ridiculed Colonial troops were still fighting. Men of Maryland and Virginia with a scattering from the other Colonies, tunics thrown aside and sleeves rolled up, their arms powder blackened to the elbows, they held the triumphant raiders in check with stubborn courage and kept the disaster from becoming an utter massacre.

The Colonials made a stand at the creek, holding the bank against pounding waves of assault to let the last of the survivors get across. Near the end Trelawny saw a light wagon come swaying down the rough trail at a headlong gallop, a wounded British officer driving the horses. As the wagon splashed through the stream without slackening pace, he glanced inside to see Colonel Washington crouching beside the figure of a badly wounded officer.

"It's Braddock!" Dan'l Morgan said in a flat voice. "And he looks to be hurt bad. Poor devil! I wonder what he's thinking now!"

It was dusk, and the waters of the creek were touched with crimson as the grim-faced Colonial rear-guard took up the retreat while painted figures darted from tree to tree behind them.

Just as they pulled back from the river bank, a slight figure in civilian clothes darted out from a clump of bushes parked across the stream. The man ran wildly for the ford, with half a dozen rifles twinkling like fireflies behind him as the Algonquins fired. Bullets were sending up sharp spurts of water all around him, but he was more than half way across when a leaden slug struck home and he went sprawling in the bloody shallows.

Carter Trelawny turned back. His long legs took him down the slope and into the knee-deep water in a rush, before the riflemen across the stream quite knew what was happening. They fired at him then, but he flung the little teamster over his shoulder and made his way back to the trail with nothing worse than a shallow bullet-scrape on his left shoulder. The man he had rescued seemed badly hurt. As Trelawny dumped him in one of the few wagons that remained, he recognized the now pale and haggard face of the squat little teamster who had seemed to recognize him back at Fort Cumberland.

Of all the wounded and otherwise disabled men in that shattered remnant of an army, it had been his fortune to rescue the one man likely to send him to the gallows!

FOR four days the broken wreck of what had once been an army struggled back through the wilderness, along the way they had come, while shallow graves dotted the trail as the wounded died. Scalping parties of Indians hung continually on their flanks and rear. It was still the grim and gaunt Colonials who did most of the rear guard work, for the morale of the Regulars had been too shattered in their terrible defeat.

"I'll say one thing for this bloody mess," Dan'l Morgan muttered as he plodded along with his rifle under his arm, a four days' growth of beard on his square and stubborn chin, "It has made veteran soldiers of a lot of stout lads who may some day make use of that knowledge. The privates of this campaign may some day be the officers of a Colonial army, if we ever have to fight England for our liberty."

General Braddock died during the night, died with his bloody lips still muttering the endless phrase: "Who would have believed it?" They laid his body beside the trail, and a moment later Colonel Washington turned away from a hasty conference with Captain Orme, who was the only other staff officer in any condition to make decisions.

"Dig his grave in the center of the trail," Washington said, "so we can disguise the spot, lest the Indians come to dig him up. At least we owe him that much!"

It was a scene that Carter Trelawny was never to forget, a figment from hell lighted by a pair of flickering pine torches and a single dim lanthorn. The narrow wilderness road was a canyon of shadow

in the midst of the forest, and the torch-light glinted on the rifle barrels and restless eyes of guarding Colonials while other men dug a shallow grave in haste and in fear. Owls were hooting in the dense thickets on either side.

They buried Edward Braddock just at dawn, a flag covering the body as it lay in the open grave. There was no one but Colonel Washington to read the burial service. "Ashes to ashes . . . dust unto dust." The tall Virginian's voice stumbled awkwardly over the unfamiliar words, and as soon as he had finished, the grave was hastily filled in. Then they drove the remaining wagons across the spot, and the rear-guard marched over it, and at the end there was nothing to show where a brave though stubborn and mistaken man had been laid. The column continued its weary way southward.

An hour later, trudging forward with a message at a time when the column was momentarily halted, Trelawny came upon a wagon that had broken its axle and was being abandoned. The wounded who had been riding in the wagon now lay on the moss, and a harassed surgeon straightened up from examining them.

"Places must be found in some wagon for these three," he said in a low voice to the men beside him, "but the other is far gone. He'll be dead within a very few minutes."

Moving a step aside to glance down at the dying man, Trelawny recognized the little teamster he had pulled from the stream. Recognition came into the man's pain-tortured eyes, and his pale lips moved soundlessly. Then Trelawny noticed his right hand, a hand curiously scarred on the back, and suddenly memory stirred within him.

It was the hand of the teamster, face hidden by a broad brimmed hat, who had been in the tap-room of the *Half Moon* on that night so long, and who had stared into the back room when Trelawny stood swaying by the table with the British officer dead at his feet.

"You were in Schenectady!" Trelawny said, and noticed that Dave Ravenswood had come up to lean on his rifle beside him. The dying teamster's voice came to them faintly.

"Aye, and you never killed that officer. A cut-purse stole in to take his gold while he lay unconscious. When the officer started to recover, the robber slew him and then escaped out the window."

Trelawny frowned.

"Why didn't you speak?"

"I was afraid . . . and later . . . there was a reward," the teamster gasped—and died.

UNUTTERABLY weary from days of marching and fighting with practically no sleep at all, Trelawny leaned on the muzzle of his long rifle. At the moment he was too tired to know if he should feel pleased or discouraged at what he had just heard. At least he had not killed that officer in Schenectady as he had thought—but the only man who could have cleared him now lay dead beside this wilderness road.

"I heard him," Ravenswood said heavily. "But I doubt if they'd take the word of a penniless forest-runner in evidence. . . ."

"Don't worry about that," a quiet voice said behind them, and Trelawny turned to see Colonel Washington.

The Colonial officer was as lean and gaunt and haggard as any of them, but at the moment he was smiling. "I heard the man's confession myself, and when we get back I'll make an affidavit before the governer of Virginia that should clear you. Then you will be able to return to Schenectady."

"I'll be glad to clear my name," Trelawny said. "But I'm not sure I'll go back. Forest running gets hold of a man. I'm not sure I'd be content living the life of the settlements any more."

Washington smiled again. "Both of you must keep in touch with me as the years go by," he said, "this trouble with the French and Indians will pass into history in a year or so, but the day may come when America will have need of all her fighting men in a far greater struggle!"

WAGONS WESTWARD

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

"No greater love hath any man. . . ." A hard-tongued, hard fighting wagon-boss pays a final price to make the stuff of Empire.

THE caravan had bivouacked in the edge of the Davis Mountains on the Old Spanish Trail. Wagons were circled and oxen tethered outside the ring. Camp fires crackled as dry limbs crumbled to ashes. Oxen cropped grass, then lay down and rolled their cuds. Women sighed at disarranged households. Children scampered about. Men sat in little groups, conjecturing.

When the last slice of sowbelly had been fried they smothered the fire; for they were in the heart of the Comanche country. The camp was dark until a wide West Texas moon pulled up and flooded the plains. Rifles were oiled as men cast furtive looks in all directions.

"It's a good night for 'em, hey?" said Stuart Allison, the young man from Georgia. "Too much moon for our health."

"Yeah," responded Morgan—he was from Alabama—"too much moon. What you goin' to do about it, Ned?"

"What would you do about it?" growled Ned Clay, the wagon boss.

Morgan said, "I'd go to sleep and forget it. And that's what I'm goin' to do. Wake me up if they come on, will you?"

"Huh! We don't need no invitation for that," said Clay.

CLAY and Allison sat there on a wagon tongue. Snores and the rustling of the oaks as a sluggish breeze toyed with their leaves were the only noises. The boding quiet grated on young Allison's nerves. It had been a tedious day. All days were tedious with the wagon trains. El Paso lay at the end of a long, hot trail.

Everything was still. Outposts nodded as they tramped to their stations. Once Allison reached for his rifle. But it was only an outpost's tread.

Clay chuckled. "What's the matter, kid?"

"I got the creeps, Ned."

"What for?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's—it's all so damn foreign out here."

"Everybody says so, first trip."

Allison arose, paced up and down before Clay. He filled his pipe, started to light it. Clay jumped up, blew out the match.

"You fool!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know what we been talkin' about? This is bad Injun lands. Comanches been raisin' Billy-hell round here for weeks. One light might bring an arrow. There's enough moon without you givin' us away. Sit down."

Allison sank slowly back onto the wagon tongue. "Looks like we're the first train out this spring. Sorta wish there'd been others to break the trail, don't you?"

Clay eyed him disdainfully, got up and walked around the circle of wagons on inspection. Allison heard him as he talked in an undertone with the sentries. But he couldn't hear what the wagon boss said and that worried him.

"Men and oxen weary, worn out," he muttered. "Sowbelly and beans—and more sowbelly. No buffalo crossing the trail. I bet if all the horses and mules and oxen that have died on this trail were placed head to tail they'd stretch from here to Honolulu. But it's the Indians—the Indians. They're out there somewhere now. I've heard they hang you by your thumbs before they scalp you. Good Lord! I can almost hear them breathing, it's so still!"

The moon was wreathed in rounded clouds. It seemed to Allison that the air was suffocating. He jumped at an ox's snort. He got up again and walked about, fanning with his hat.

"There's no sense in this trip," he grumbled to himself—"not with all the Indians. They talk to you about adventure. They don't tell you about the

Allison raised Clay to his back and trotted unevenly . . . finally staggered into the camp circle.

skulkers. No, you can't see 'em, but you know they're out there waiting. We'll never make El Paso."

He wheeled and started to flee. Then a sudden thought struck him. Safer here in the makeshift fortress of the wagons, than out there on the plains, or back up in the hills. He quickened his gait, tracking back and forth. The air was humid. Sweat rolled down his face.

"Ain't afraid, are you, kid?" It was Clay, watching him stumbling there in the moonlight.

Allison said violently:

"Hell, yes, I'm afraid! I know they're going to strike any minute."

"Who's goin' to strike?"

"Indians."

"Mebbe you better get a gun and stand watch a while. It'll help you quit shiverin'. Out there with the wolves to keep you company."

Clay slapped a rifle against his shoulder. Allison held it limply, did not move.

"Get on out there, you calf!" Clay

ordered. I'm goin' to scare that fear outa you. You understand that, don't you!"

"No."

"I didn't think you would. See that knoll? All right, that's your station. Tell Sturgis you're relievin' him. If you see Injuns, shoot in the air three times. I'll be watchin' you to see that you don't run away."

"What would you do—if I did run away?"

Clay patted his rifle significantly.

"Not that! You—you wouldn't!"

"I sure would."

"You're—you're going to stay up and watch me?"

"That's what I'm aimin' to do. Later, you'll thank me for makin' a man outa you."

"Go to hell!" Allison snarled as he crawled toward the knoll.

CLAY, watching, saw him reach his station, motion Sturgis back to the wagons, then look about. Allison's form looked like a slight felled sapling etched against the purple sky.

Sturgis squirmed in and looked questioningly at Clay.

"What's the matter? I been on watch only half an hour."

"I'm doin' a little experimentin', makin' a man tonight."

"Not outa Allison," protested Sturgis. "Why, that kid's tremblin' so hard it's a wonder his teeth don't fall out. You hadn't oughta do it, Ned."

Receiving no answer, Sturgis shook his head and rolled up in his blanket.

Clay hid behind a wheel and bit into a twist of tobacco. He thought aloud, appealing to himself in a low voice:

"That was a dirty trick you played on the kid, Ned, you old fool. You ain't got a licka sense—not a lick. That was a damn-fool thing—sendin' him out to that knoll. Allison, he really don't know how dangerous it is. If he did, he'd die of heart failure."

He watched the tenderfoot lying prone on the knoll. Good boy, Allison. . . . Too tender, though, for the trail. Couple of hours on the knoll ought to scare all the fright out of him. Bad night. Hot and still and moony. Just ripe for a redskin sortie—and if they came, Allison wouldn't have a chance. He wouldn't know enough to lie still. He'd jump up like a rabbit and run.

Clay's sympathy clashed with his abhorrence of fear—and won. He decided to crawl out and relieve the tenderfoot. Just then three cracks sounded from Allison's rifle. Clay stiffened. He saw Allison running toward the camp. An arrow flashed through the moonlight. Allison slumped down on the side of the knoll and lay still. From the distance sounded yells that made Clay grip his rifle tighter.

"Injuns comin' on!" a sentry yelled.

The camp stirred out of its sleep. Women, dragging children, popped out of the wagons and hovered in the center protection. Oxen were hustled to the circle. Morgan came running up to Clay.

"We're in for it, Ned! What makes you stand there like you're in a trance? Didn't you hear the shots?"

Clay shoved him aside, leaned his rifle against the wheel and dashed out in the open.

Morgan gazed after him with open mouth. "Hey! What's the matter with you? You gone crazy?" He watched Clay until a whizzling arrow told him it was time to seek protection.

Clay found Allison face down with an arrow between his shoulders. The warwhoops were plainer now. Arrows began raining over the knoll. Answering shots blazed from the wagon circle. Clay pulled the arrow out of Allison's back as tenderly as he could.

"You alive, kid? Honest, I meant to make a man outa you. I wanted to help you. Damn it, Allison, tell me you're alive!"

Allison did not speak. Clay rolled him over and tried to rouse him. He laid an ear on Allison's chest. There was life, all right. He lifted him to his back and half-ran, half-staggered toward the circle, bending low. There were more arrows and more yells. Clay glanced around as he ran. Indians were crawling over the knoll. He heard a death-shriek as a bullet from the circle caught one of them.

Clay stumbled and fell. He got up, shook himself, rubbed his eyes. There

was Allison on the ground. He walked toward him, dazed. He loomed up, a fine target now.

The fall had jarred Allison into consciousness. He blinked and started to get up, but fell back cautiously. He saw Clay lying at his side, bloody. A volley of shots from the wagons puzzled him. Then he remembered: *The rustle of a bush. Two glinting eyes. Indians. Three shots in the air. A sprint for the camp. A tingle in his back.* And now here he was not far from the shelter of the wagons. But Clay? What was he doing there with an arrow in his neck?

"You—you sorta understand now, kid, that—I—I was tryin' to—to—help you?" Clay mumbled.

Allison stretched out a hand to Clay. The wagon boss smiled as they clasped.

"Better hurry, kid—if you can make it—to camp. I hope—hope you—live—all right. I'm sorry if I killed you—instead of—makin' a man—of you!"

Allison turned his head. The knoll was alive with Indians. He crawled toward Clay.

"No, no, kid! You can't save me. You go on—alone—quick!"

Allison managed to get his arms around Clay and drag him toward the wagons. The tenderfoot wasn't afraid now. Somehow, triumphant strength surged within him. He raised Clay to his back and trotted unevenly. Clay's big body pressed painfully against him, but Allison pushed on, finally staggered into the camp circle. He heard the devilish whoops, growing fainter as the fire from the wagons increased, was conscious that a woman was cleansing his wound as he went to sleep.

The sun awakened him. They had laid him in one of the wagons. Morgan and his wife sat beside him.

"A fine thing you did last night, kid," Morgan said. "But—but—Ned Clay's dead."

Where were they? Who killed Clay? Then it came back to him. He started up, wetted his lips.

"Clay's dead!" The tenderfoot buried his head in his arms. His voice was curiously muffled as he spoke.

"He—he paid a big price to make a man out of me!"

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WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM

A Novelet of The Great Plains

By BILL COOK

The trap was sprung! A thousand yelling Utes poured down from the hills, scalp-knives gleaming. What hope for a shattered wagon-train . . . manned by a lot of shrinking pilgrims, and bossed by a painted, horse-stealin' Injun savage?

A THIN, wavering column of blue-gray smoke climbed lazily from the camp-fire beside the small meandering creek and around it, in various attitudes of despairing anxiety, were grouped five men and three women. In every direction, wherever their eager eyes searched, stretched the endless wilderness of the great virgin West. In their little pocket in the hills they waited, their eyes smoke-rimmed and tired with the watching, probing the vast rolling land, scanning the far-away heights of the Rockies that rose like a towering mist-shrouded wall in the light of the now swiftly lowering sun.

"It's two days," groaned one of the men, an elderly, roan-bearded, hungry-looking man. "Two days near gone," he repeated, his voice forlorn and hollow as the echo of wind in a tomb, "an' nary a sign or a sound of them. They all been kilt an' skelped by Injuns, I'm tellin' yuh. We're finished, all of us, good as dead ourselves."

The others listened to him for the lack of something else to do. All day old Sim Gover had been whining the same story. Even the girl and her brother, the two youngest of the party, paid him no heed now. No one answered the old man. Each was striving to keep up his courage.

The girl, however, moved closer to her younger brother and whispered gently in his ear: "While there's life there's hope, Dick. You're not afraid, are you?"

Dick Morrison was a tall, well-built lad of seventeen, as tall as his sister, two years his senior. Clad in work-worn homespuns and heavy boots, with a flop-brimmed hat of indeterminate hue pushed back from his brow, he was an independent looking youngster—blue-eyed and devil-may-care. Grinning, now, he flung a strong arm about his sister's shoulders.

"Afraid?" he shrugged. "Of what? What is there to be afraid of here?" He smoothed the barrel of his rifle significantly. "If they don't get back by nightfall, I'm goin' to assert myself. With Uncle John gone now, I've got the two of us to look out for."

ANN smiled at her brother a little proudly. She and Dick would show these men and women what courage meant. Wasn't the plight of the party terrible enough without adding to the misery by moaning and groaning. "Shhh, Dick," she cautioned the boy, as she caught the turning of a black-bearded face in their direction. "I don't want you and Mister Colfaxe getting into arguments now. Be quiet. He's looking at us."

"If he sticks his beard into my affairs," replied Dick determinedly, "I'll show him a thing or two. He's got to leave you alone, too, or I'll make him wish the Injuns'd fetched him up with a tommyhawk. It's most his fault we're in this pickle."

A glance showed the boy that the swarthy Colfaxe was observing him closely. Trying to hear what he said to his sister, no doubt. Well, Colfaxe could go jump when Uncle John or any of the others came back.

It was two nights before that practically all of their stock had disappeared, vanished like will-o'-the-wisps in thin air. That morning, when the absence of the animals was discovered, a party of four of the

As the men piled into the crowded Conestoga, the Indian leaped forth like a catamount. . . .

men had set out in search of the beasts. Among the four was John Lade, uncle of the Morrisons.

None of the four returned by nightfall, and the following morning, six more of the men had volunteered to go out in the hope of finding a trace of the first four. Five men were left behind to guard the women and the supplies.

"Here it is near sundown again," growled Burley Colfaxe, stamping around the fire. "They either went off an' left us, or—or they been murdered by Injuns. An' us keepin' this fire burnin', damn it!" He spat into the feeble blaze angrily. "Lade says to keep a fire so they kin use the smoke fer a guide. Well, says I, if they kin see it, so kin Injuns. Where's all them soldiers they told us was marchin' around this damn' country?" Nobody answered him and he added, "Injuns runnin' wild all over the nation, slaughtering helpless emigrants. An' Lade lets our stock jus' wander off, then goes an' loses hisself tryin' to find 'em. Next time I'll know better'n hook on with no bob-tailed dudes."

True enough they were in constant danger. With the Indian tribes warring against the overland trains, against the few scattered troops that the government had assigned the duty of keeping order and raiding each other's villages, the frontier across which the wagon trains pushed their creaking wheels in 1851 was a vast playground of death. Redskins and white renegades alike swooped down on poorly protected settlers and emigrants, killing, burning and plundering. Should some roving band of Sioux or Cheyenne savages sight the smoke of the Lade train's fire, the fate of the little party would make but another crimson entry in the history of an empire's westward path. And added to this constant fear was the one which beset so many other followers of the rutted trail to California—distrust for some of their own fellows. Bickering had begun. Only the boy and girl held themselves apart, stoically

alert, confident that their uncle would appear alive and with the stock.

Ann motioned now to her brother. "Do you think you can go up there again, Dick?" she asked him wistfully. She meant up to the top of the hill near the camp, Dick knew.

"It's near sunset again," he said grimly. "No, I'm not afraid. Guess I'd better go up and take another look. Don't worry, Sis."

Without another word he sped off, splashing through the creek and starting for the hill top. The girl clasped her hands at her slim waist and gripped the fingers tightly as she watched her brother's long strides, saw the rifle in his hand. The others saw him go, too, but no one spoke.

They were almost beyond talking.

II

THE Indian jerked his weary horse suddenly backward from the crest of the hill and guided the animal cautiously a dozen paces down the slope along the way he had come. Here he slid from the tired beast's back and quickly tied a rawhide rein to a dead jackpine. Then, afoot and moving with the stealth of a panther, the savage returned swiftly to a point just below the edge of the hill. He stretched himself full length in the sparse grass, fixing his sharp eyes on the thing that had drawn his gaze. Smoke! A white man's camp.

"White men," flashed through the savage mind. He shook his head thoughtfully. His brows drew tightly together in a frown that made his bronzed handsome face look like that of a snarling cat. "Fools! Tenderfoot camp."

With eyes trained and accustomed to distinguishing objects at great distances, the Indian watched the scene below. He lay on his belly for a long time, while the sun sank lower and lower beyond the jagged blue-white backbone of the Rocky Mountains westward. The tiny crawling things that were white emigrants were huddled like trapped jackrabbits in a pocket of the hills below him. From his position he could have easily killed them; might have shot them one by one with his rifle, the weapon he had bought from a trapper far away up in the north country. He had bought it with skins and it was, strangely enough, a good gun.

Down-slope from its rider, the dusty, sweat-streaked black horse with one white forefoot munched the sun-dried grass hungrily. From the horn of the crude Spanish saddle hung a long lance made of an ash sapling and a sharply ground sword blade. There also hung a greasy coil of rawhide rope, or lariat. In the Indian's hand lay the prized rifle and on his back, as he sprawled flat, rested a five-foot bow of osage and a quiver beautifully embroidered with beads and the dyed quills of the porcupine. The quiver was well filled with metal tipped arrows.

Armed to the very teeth was Stone Thrower as he shaded his eyes with a sinewy brown hand, studying one figure among those below him. A girl! A white woman, young and pleasing to the eye; a fair skinned squaw with hair the color of a new silken corn tassel. She had the slim rounded body of a lovely young doe and she moved with the grace and ease of a panther kitten. The glint of burnished gold was on her hair as the sloping rays of the setting sun struck it, lighting it with a glow like the red gold flames of a brave's camp fire.

"White woman!" The thought burned itself into the Indian's brain. His first white woman! None had even penetrated north to the region of the Powder River, home land of the Crows. And Stone Thrower was a Crow. His friends among the trappers, the mountain men, had told him of beautiful white squaws, of the pale faced, flaxen haired women who tramped with their men through the wilderness to the land of the setting sun. With the Crow raiders he had seen such golden scalps dangling from the lodge poles of the migrating Sioux. But here was one in the flesh, alive, unsuspecting. Something about her stirred strange emotions in the Stone Thower's breast, and he snaked one hand slowly toward the razor edged hunting knife sheathed at his belt.

He saw the girl move closer to the boy, then the boy started up the nearby hill, scarcely more than one of the mounds the ants build. Instinctively Stone Thrower pushed back the heavy bearskin hat so that the two eagle feathers on it would not mark his position in case the boy's eyes

turned his way. He noted the fearless carriage of the white youth, the menace of the rifle in the lad's hand. His own fingers began flexing like the claws of a big cat making ready to spring. Then he uttered a sound deep in his throat.

"These people are lost in this wild country," he mused. With a quick searching of the plain and mountain he began edging cautiously backward. Not a moving thing was in sight, not even a lobo on the hunt. But the Cheyenne and the Arapaho and the Kiowa were wily stalkers—This was their hunting range and here eight scalps for a warrior's lance head.

Reaching his horse, the Indian mounted and, with a sudden decision that set his bronze face in a metallic mask, guided the animal up the hill to where the rider had lain but a minute before. Here he drew the horse to a halt, holding it firmly with his knees. A moment of waiting, with the horse and rider as motionless as a statue, then Stone Thrower raised both hands high above his head. The boy had seen him and was poised to run, but standing as if frozen with fear or excitement.

"Friend," mumbled Stone Thrower, lips forming the white man's word as he reached with his right hand and clasped his left above his head. It was the Indians' sign of friendship. He saw the boy's head turn. From far below him he could hear the cry of alarm, the shout of warning. He moved his gaze, saw the remaining seven around the fire lift their faces toward him. A quartet of rifles were raised and he saw the smoke flowers bloom moments before the rattle of the gunfire reached his ears. Motionless he remained in defiance of the white men's shooting, his own weapons hanging from his saddle horn, until he saw the boy running now, plunging down the slope at breakneck speed and one man among those at the fire shouting something to his companions, waving his arms angrily.

Then, stiffly, without haste, the Indian swung his horse around and faded from sight.

OLD JEFF AGNEW raised his voice for the first time that day. He sprang toward Colfaxe who was re-loading for another shot at the redskin. Agnew was mad all through. "Stop that damn fool shootin'!" he yelled. "Ain't you got no brains? The Injun is givin' yuh the peace sign. He says he's a friend!"

Colfaxe tore loose from the leather skinned older man. His face was purple with rage and terror. "You're an old idjit!" he snarled. "I know Injuns, damn yuh. It's a redskin trick. Treachery! And yuh made me miss my shot, yuh hell-fired meddler."

Agnew backed slowly off from Colfaxe and jerked a heavy dragoon six-shooter from his waistband. "Keep a civil tongue in yore head, Colfaxe," he said calmly. "This may be our last day on earth, but by Heaven, I'm full up of yore bullheaded bossin'. This train's been hoodooed by you ever sence we left Saint Joe. Now I'm takin' charge. Listen tuh me—all of yuh. We're facin' another night here in this place. And if—" His shifting eyes flashed and he paused. The others turned to look. Coming straight toward them in the paling light against the rose-colored sky and the blue-green hills, they saw distinctly the figure of a mounted Indian. "It's him," said Jeff Agnew, "an' if one of yuh makes a crazy move I'll blow his brains out myself. The fate of these gals," he motioned to the three women, staring wide-eyed, "is hangin' by a hair. I'll do the pow-wowin' with this buck."

Colfaxe's black beard trembled with nervous irritation and anger. Agnew was a hard-boiled old fellow and was supposed to have been some years along the Arkansas. He cast a quick look toward Sim Gover for sign of help but the old man's eyes were riveted on the approaching savage. In fact, all eight emigrants were now silently waiting, watching.

Then they saw a strange thing. The nearing Indian raised both arms outward and moved them down and up as a man would imitate the flapping wings of a bird. Old Jeff grinned, rammed his pistol back into his belt and made the sign of friendship, calling out in a high-pitched but clear voice: "Welcome, my Crow brother. Forgive my friends for the hasty shooting. They were excited."

The Crow brave walked his horse along the edge of the creek to within four strides of the tableau. On his dark face was a grin and his right palm was raised. "How,

friends," he said in good English, as he slid to the ground. A quick look at the faces before him and his eyes came to rest on the girl's challenging gaze. For a moment filled with suspense, the Indian's piercing eyes were fixed on the girl. Her brother edged nearer to her in an attitude of defense, and the others silently drew closer. Jeff Agnew was the first to speak.

He stepped up to within arm's reach of the tall, erect Indian and peered into the savage's eyes. "My Crow friend," smiled old Jeff, "has the eyes of a white man. They're as blue as the steel of his hunting knife. Is this not unusual, even among the Crow nation?"

The Indian took a step away from Agnew, nearer to the golden-haired Anne Morrison. He smiled with simple friendliness and reached out his right hand to touch the hair which still held the glow of the last lingering sun rays. The contact seemed to shock him, for he drew back his arm as if from a leaping spark. The girl showed no fear, but the youth beside her trembled visibly, his fingers tightening on his half-raised rifle.

"Do not be afraid," said the tall Indian, looking even taller in the high bearskin hat with the eagle feathers perched above it. "I saw the white woman from afar. She should wear a blanket over her head. It is bright as a flaming pine knot."

"Our Crow brother rides many suns," cut in Old Jeff. "He will share our meat with us?"

THE Indian turned unhurriedly toward Agnew and nodded. "I am known as Stone Thrower, my friends," he said. "I have made a long trail and I am weary. I will eat at your fire."

Agnew shot a glance at Colfaxe, warning him, then he ventured: "Stone Thrower speaks the white man's tongue almost as good as I do. This is strange, brother."

"Not strange, my friend," replied Stone Thrower, glancing again at the face of Anne. "In the country to the north where the Crow tipis number many hundreds I have spent many pleasant days, even months, with white men. The mountain men who trap our streams and forests. I have made good friends of the white trappers."

Old Jeff Agnew asked him solemnly, "You are traveling alone? Does my red brother hunt for game?"

"Yes," said Stone Thrower, and he wondered now if these white men were friends of the men whose bodies he had come upon the day before. "But I am hunting a man!"

As he spoke, Stone Thrower sat himself down suddenly beside the fire and removed the big bearskin hat. The action brought a simultaneous gasp of surprise from both men and women, and young Dick Morrison moved forward, bending to look at the Indian closer.

Jeff Agnew stared at the Crow a tense moment, unable to find the words he wanted. He, too, was transfixed, his keen eyes glued on the guest's hair. "Red hair, or I'm a barkin' prarie dawg. A Crow with red hair. You ain't no Injun, Stone Thrower, or whatever yore name is. Yo're a white man, white as I am."

Stone Thrower smiled. He looked again toward Anne Morrison. The girl had come forward and dropped to her knees quite close to the mysterious Indian. Her full lips were parted in astonishment and her eyes were wide with wonder.

"You *are* a white man!" she said. Her voice was rich and soft as the murmur of a brook among the reeds. "You are playing a despicable joke on us. If I were a man—"

Quick as a flash her brother, Dick, jerked up his rifle muzzle and brought it to bear less than twenty inches from Stone Thrower's face. "I'll blow him to Kingdom Come if yuh say so, Anne," he cried. "Speak up, mister, what's yore name? Out with it, quick!"

A swift move of Jeff Agnew's clawing hand swept the gun muzzle upward, and Stone Thrower laughed; laughed heartily.

"The joke, as you call it, must be on Stone Thrower," he said calmly, ignoring the boy or the looks of disbelief of the others. "I have been an Indian all my life—or as much of it as I can remember. Trappers, too, have called me a white man. Some have said that I was a white man gone native."

"But your father and mother?" asked Anne. "Were they Indians? Do you remember them?"

Stone Thrower's face was turned to-

ward the girl and his expression became grave with some deep emotion. The strangely glittering blue eyes narrowed, and he seemed to look beyond the girl, over the heads of the white people around him, into the obscuring distance beyond the mountains. "My father was Strong Horse, a Crow chief," he said thoughtfully, "and my mother—the only mother I remember —was Two Fawns. The Brule who killed her while I was off hunting fled from the northern plains but I have followed him. When we meet I will tear his heart out with my fingers."

Jeff Agnew cleared his throat and turned away. It was quite dark and they had relaxed their vigilance. "We must feed our friend," he said finally and quickly issued instructions to the others for the replenishing of the fire, the preparation of a meal.

The big Indian sat silent as though brooding, casting only an occasional glance upward and then invariably toward the girl, Anne. She was conscious of his eyes, conscious, too, of something more than mere curiosity in the visitor. Could it be that he was really a white man who had forgotten his own people, stolen from his mother's arms as an infant too young to remember? She had heard of such things back in Massachusetts, of settlers slain, their cabins burned and the children carried off to become slaves of the cruel red men.

"Tell me, Stone Thrower," she said, bolstering her courage, "have you ever scalped anyone?"

"Many times," replied the Indian. "I have taken many scalps and have stolen many horses. The Crows are the greatest horse stealers in the world. Scalps and horses are trophies a warrior counts with pride."

Anne wanted to make a friend of this wild nomad of the wilderness but doubted the wisdom of her unaccountable thoughts. They were in a desperate plight. With Uncle John gone—perhaps dead—and their horses vanished, they were marooned in the very wildest region of the foothills. And Stone Thrower had just boasted of being an expert horse thief.

"We have no horses," she ventured, "as you can see. We cannot move without horses, unless we leave all our things."

"You will have horses," declared Stone Thrower as if he had decided this for himself already. "Stone Thrower is a friend of the white man—and"—he looked at Anne boldly—"and the white woman."

III

THAT night, after the women had retired to their blankets in the wagons, Stone Thrower sat long beside the flickering fire with Jeff Agnew. Burley Colfaxe, smoldering inwardly, had been assigned to duty as the first of the night guards, and not daring to oppose old Jeff Agnew, he had mounted the little rise of ground with his rifle, unable to hear the muffled conversation of the two at the fire. Young Dick Morrison, however, had placed his blankets in a position from which he could by cupping an ear catch a word now and then.

It was thus that the boy learned the story of his Uncle John's death, the finding of two groups of scalped white men by Stone Thrower.

Dick's heart was like lead.

"The Cut-Arms," Stone Thrower told Agnew in a low, emotionless tone. "You call them Cheyenne. I know their sign."

"All kilt, eh?" mused old Jeff, shaking his head. "An' yuh say you think you kin git our hosses back from them thievin' Injuns, Stone Thrower?"

"Yes," replied the bronzed figure beside him. "I will ride from your camp with the sun. Now we will sleep." And he dropped full length on the ground, drawing a blanket about him.

Agnew sat for a while, thinking. Savages had run their stock off first without a shot or sound. Then both search parties were murdered. And still the Cheyennes, knowing as they must where the remnant of the party was camped, had not returned. Why was this? Were the Cut-Arms planning some ghastly massacre, to take place at their pleasure? His sleep that night was troubled and fitful.

With the first gray light of dawn, the emigrants were up again, red-eyed and weary. What would the day hold in store for them? Stone Thrower said but few words and seemed to be in a great hurry. He wolfed his fried meat and downed the

white man's coffee in a rush, rose from the fireside and went off to bring up his picketed horse. Full-blooded Indian or not, he wasted no words. Climbing into his saddle he shot a quick glance toward Anne, leaned toward Jeff Agnew in friendly fashion, and said: "The white trappers in the north say 'Keep yore eyes skinned.' I ride now for your horses. If you must move from here, leave me some sign. I will return in two days."

They could hear the soft drumming of his horse's feet long after he disappeared in the mist. The stark silence that followed his going was broken at last by Colfaxe, who flung his tin plate down with a clatter and turned on Agnew, his black beard dripping with grease and his eyes aflame. "Agnew," he fairly hissed, "yuh mean to tell us you 'lowed that hellion to git away from here alive? To bring back more of 'em to wipe us out?"

Agnew grinned at Colfaxe, remained silent.

"Damn powerful gent, iffen yuh ask me," broke in Sim Gover. "I wouldn't trust him behindst me nohow."

"Nobody asked yuh, Gover," snapped Agnew, "an' nobody is gonna be any worse off, Colfaxe, if this Stone Thrower don't return. If he's a liar then we still got a chance of Lade or the others gittin' back here. If he ain't a liar, we'll git our stock an' we kin move. I believe him."

"So do I, Mister Agnew," added Dick eagerly. "First off, I nearly shot him down like a wolf, but he didn't scare."

Colfaxe said no more.

The waiting, for the men, at least, was worse now than before the Stone Thrower had told Agnew of the fate of their companions. No longer must they watch for John Lade, or Williams, or "Skianna" Belton. Those brave fellows had passed to the Great Beyond. They waited now for an Indian, a bronzed savage with blue eyes and reddish hair, a man who boasted that he had taken many scalps—a self-confessed horse thief who bragged of his thievery.

Would such a creature come back to them; keep his promise?

LATE in the afternoon of that first day the winds brought them the distinct but faint sounds of shooting. It might have been three miles; perhaps ten miles. The winds in the Rockies do strange things. But the darkness crept down on them as before with no sign of red men or white. Because the train had drawn off some four miles from the rutted route overland to California to make their camp where the grass was better and water was at hand, none of them now had been able to catch sight of the trail or other travelers along its path. Now Jeff Agnew cursed the place.

The meal was a silent occasion. After it was over Anne Morrison retired to the wagon which had been her uncle's, and was joined there shortly, to her complete surprise, by Burley Colfaxe, like a great black bear in the darkness. She shrank back from him instinctively.

"Don't yuh be afraid, Anne," he whispered assuringly. "I come here to tell yuh what I been thinkin'. Listen, Anne: Agnew is out o' his mind. Yuh can't count on him no more, an' we'll all die here of starvation when our supplies is gone."

Anne straightened stiffly and peered into Colfaxe's face. She saw the fierce gleam in his black eyes and the nervous twitching of his frame. "And what do you propose, Mister Colfaxe?" she demanded softly. "Even if what you say is not true."

"It is, Anne," insisted the bearded man. "An' I'm planning fer you an' me to run off tonight. I got weapons an' we'll take grub; git back to the California Trail an' join up with some other train. I'll marry yuh, too, soon's we kin git to a preacher!"

"It's you, Mister Colfaxe," the girl replied coldly, "who's out of his mind. I have no intention of deserting our friends—and certainly no idea of marrying you. Hadn't you better try your charms on Skianna Belton's sister? She's a maiden lady and nearer your age."

"But, Anne," Colfaxe made a motion to catch her with his big hairy hands and she jerked away angrily. "I'll—"

His words broke off suddenly as a figure loomed in the dark close to him. Dick stood half crouched to spring, a clubbed pistol in his hand. "What was you sayin', mister?" snapped the youth. "You weren't threatenin' my sister by any chance, were yuh?"

"O' course not," answered Colfaxe war-

ily. And Anne herself put out a hand, touched Dick's shoulder. "It's all right, Dick," she said. "We are in enough danger without any misunderstandings among us. Good night, Mister Colfaxe. Better sleep under the wagon, tonight, Dick. We might have a storm."

But there was no storm, nothing to disturb the ominous silence of the wilderness dark. The men took their turns on guard. There was only the plaintive whispering sounds of the forest along the hill shoulders.

Next day, hour after hour, the little group watched, straining eyes and ears for sight or sound, but no one came. Even Jeff Agnew and Anne now, as evening drew near, began to doubt. Sunset lighted the whole western world with a monstrous orange flame.

"Well," sneered Colfaxe, as the purple shadows deepened, "I told yuh that Injun was a lyin' snake. Two days an' no sign of him. I say we oughta make up some light packs and travel afoot. Leave our stuff. It won't be no good to us, dead."

The fifth man of the party, who seldom spoke, and whom the others avoided because when he did speak he spat tobacco juice at random, now shook his finger at Colfaxe. "You, Colfaxe," he drawled, "got the biggest mouth around these diggins. Iffen you don't want yore stuff you kin pack yore duds an' make tracks any time. No one holdin' yuh. I'm fer the Injun. Give him time!"

Colfaxe snapped furiously, "Who's askin' yore lip, Broughton? This is a free country and I'll—"

"You'll do no such of a thing, yuh tinhorn," warned Broughton, producing a sticker with a ten-inch blade, and carelessly shaving the hair from the back of his gnarled hand with its edge. "Jeff Agnew is boss of this shebang now an' if yuh try makin' trouble I'll skin yuh alive. How about it, Jeff?"

AGNEW looked across the fire. He was tired, worried. Sunset was long past. It was night, night almost three hours old. He'd about given up hope himself, but he refused to admit it.

"Colfaxe, you shet that trap of yourn," he said savagely. "Leave us all alone—or git out!"

As the two men glared at each other, the fire between, young Dick Morrison suddenly froze, rigid, his head turned slightly, listening. "Listen!" he whispered as if he was afraid to lose the sound. "I hear somethin'. Like that herd of buffalo we saw that time. Hear that rumble?"

Then they all heard it; the low thunder like the pounding feet of a buffalo herd. Nearer and nearer it came, the earth began to tremble and the darkness echoed with the hammering of many hoofs on the sod.

"'Tain't buffler!" shouted Jeff Agnew. "It's hosses! It's a bunch of hosses an' they're headed this way!"

Louder and louder the sound grew, crashing horse hoofs, the snoring, whinnying beasts and the shouting of a man. With a victorious yipping cry and a yell of warning in English, they saw him burst into the circle of the camp-fire flames.

"Stone Thrower!" shouted Jeff Agnew, running for the stream with a quick loop of rope. "It's him!"

Milling around like frightened, excited colts was a mass of snorting, squealing horseflesh. "Get plenty ropes," came the voice they all recognized as their friend the Indian. "Here are your horses."

Arguments were forgotten for the moment. Everyone lent a hand. The lathered horse herd was rounded up snugly on the stream bank. Ropes were strung out, fencing them in. Dick Morrison ran head on into Stone Thrower in the dark as the big Indian was leading his own worn horse. "How," growled Stone Thrower. "I have a fine horse for your sister, my friend. A special one. A palomino. The Cut-Arms give her as a present to the girl with the golden hair."

"Gee, thanks, Stone Thrower!" said Dick, elated. "Did you get a pinto for me?"

The Indian smiled at the boy's eagerness. "Pintos," he said, laughing, "are Indians' mounts. For you, my friend, there is a beautiful young silver stallion in that bunch. You will ride him to the land of the sunset."

Old Jeff Agnew came up then. He grabbed the Indian's hand, pumping it vigorously. "How!" panted Agnew, his voice deep with emotion. "Stone Thrower is a true friend. How can we ever repay yuh?"

"By leaving this place," replied the Indian gravely, lowering his voice so that the approaching women should not hear him. "There is much blood in the wind. The tribes are gathering even now to drive the white people from their hunting grounds. Soldiers, too, many white soldiers, are abroad. There will be a war. I have seen this in the council fires, the signals along the cliffs. You must move, in the morning, swiftly."

"War, huh?" Agnew repeated the terrorizing word. "War between the tribes an' the whites. Gosh, man, we gotta get away from here!"

STONE THROWER led the way with the first gray light of dawn next morning, guiding the creaking double-hitched train carefully along a valley path to avoid the sight he had come upon the day before he arrived at the camp of his new friends. It was better, he decided, that Anne Morrison did not see what the Cheyennes had left for the vultures to pick.

It was one thing to steal and drive a herd of seventy horses across the rolling range, and another to drive eight or ten harnessed in double tandem. The blue-eyed Crow could not drive a wagon and the train, short-handed now with the loss of half its men, presented a strange picture, with wagons lashed together and pulled by twelve or fourteen, half wild, kicking, snorting beasts.

Anne Morrison drove one, taking a man's place. Beside her wagon rode the Indian, content to be near the girl with the golden hair. The girl, who had grown up on a farm in Massachusetts, drove with set lips, eyes alert to each horse, pulling them out of a stumble with a strength her slim body belied.

To the cracking of whip lash and the continual shouting of the men the train plodded valiantly north and west toward the deep rutted California Trail. Upon reaching it, they cried out in unison at the sight, far away westward, topping a rise—they saw a dust cloud and many mounted men, rifles flashing in the sun.

Old Jeff Agnew called anxiously to Stone Thrower, "Them Injuns or white men?"

For a moment Stone Thrower shaded his eyes, then: "White men," he said, relievedly. "Soldiers, coming this way."

"Good," grunted Agnew, and turned to yell back along the train, pointing to the ridge. "Look, soldiers. We're safe now."

The train drew slowly nearer to the soldiers, whose uniforms were now plainly distinguishable. At their head rode a stiffly erect young officer, his saber flashing. As they came nearer the settlers saw that there were others with the soldiers, a score or more rough-looking men. In all, the party numbered perhaps eighty riders. Agnew turned to the Indian, found that he had turned his mount back and was riding toward Anne's wagon. Agnew spat and pulled his wagon to a halt.

"Howdy!" he called as the officer drew his mount up to the wagon. "Damn glad to see you fellers." He glanced at the rugged, weather-tanned troopers, and the citizens with them. They were a tough-looking band, reckless, hard riding. They appeared afraid of nothing.

"Hello," replied the lieutenant, "you see anything of a—" he was looking down along the train as he spoke and he stopped abruptly. "Sergeant," he called over his shoulder, at which a red-faced, blocky three-striper spurred his horse forward, saluting—"I think you'd better halt this train. See that fellow down there—the redskin with the black fur hat an' feathers?"

"That's him!" cried one of the civilians, jumping his horse forward. "That's the dirty, murderin' snake."

The sergeant did not wait. In a flash the whole bunch of white men were off, riding swiftly down along the surprised train, with Jeff Agnew leaping from his wagon seat to run after them. He saw them dash up to Anne's wagon and quickly surround Stone Thrower. As he caught up with them he heard, "It's him, all right. Butchered Peterson an' his wife an' kids an' run their hosses off. Let's string him up!"

Old Jeff shouldered his way through the mounted crowd to the young lieutenant. "What the hell's goin' on here anyway?" he demanded. "You fellers take yore paws off that Injun. He's a friend of ours—a damn' good friend." Agnew was angry, looking about at the faces of the party. "Take them irons off'n him, I tell

yuh. I'll report this outrage to Washington. Yo're supposed to protect our train, damn yuh. What's he done?"

THE lieutenant sat imperturbably, brushing dust from his uniform. He glared at Agnew with a cold eye. "We've been hunting this fellow," he said coldly. "He's murdered a whole family of settlers on a little ranch up the valley there, run off all their horses an' stuff. Don't interfere with the army, Mister, I'm warning you."

Stone Thrower sat his horse silently, his brain awhirl, but his face a bronze blank. Those closest to him were staring at his eyes now, curiously, when Anne Morrison, her face flaming with surprise and anger, cried out, "It's a lie! A downright lie! He is no murderer. You've no right to arrest him."

"Miss," said the lieutenant, coloring at sight of a handsome girl, "I'm sorry, but we have men here who identify him."

"Damn 'right!" shouted a half dozen hard-looking citizens. "He's the one. We're goin' to make a example of him. Teach the damn' Injuns a lesson."

By now the whole train had halted. Reins were lashed fast and all of the little party had joined the group at Anne's wagon. The settlers were bewildered. They scarcely knew what to think. They looked at the impassive Indian curiously. Why did he offer no argument? Did his silence mean guilt? How did they know who or what he was anyway?

The army officer's story was short and succinct. A settler family named Peterson had been surprised by a lone marauder and wiped out. Their assailant had then run off their entire herd of horses. It was an open and shut case. They had a witness who had seen it all.

As he listened, Agnew's face grew grave and he shot a look up at Stone Thrower.

"Is this true, my friend?" he asked the Indian.

"No," answered Stone Thrower. "I never killed a white man in my life."

"I believe yuh, Stone Thrower," old Jeff nodded his head. Then turning to the lieutenant: "What do you mean to do with him, mister?"

"He'll get a fair trial. We'll take him to Fort Bridger and call a court there. If he's guilty, he'll hang."

Hanging, to an Indian, was the last straw. To hang meant no hereafter, no Happy Hunting Grounds, no meeting with one's warrior kin ever after. Stone Thrower's tanned features turned pale at the word. The sergeant shouted to his men, "Put a rope on him, men, an' let's sashay!"

"Good-bye, Anne Morrison," said Stone Thrower, looking steadily at the girl, "and you, my other friends. The white people's ways are strange."

The girl wet her red lips, and felt hot tears on her cheeks. Through the dust, she saw the soldiers drag him away in their midst, riding with their prisoner in the center, as befitted a desperate character, a killer Indian. Stone Thrower, his wrists clamped in heavy military irons, raised his two hands above his head, clasped his left hand with his right. It was the sign of "friendship." He had greeted them that same way back there in the pocket of the hills when they were helpless. And now, with his broad back to them, he made the sign again.

"Oh, this is dreadful!" cried Anne, bitterly. "What chance has he? What defense can he offer—an Indian?"

IV

THE wagon train continued its march sadly until they reached Skeleton Creek. Camp was made here, beside a cool spring which fed the creek. Old Jeff and his companions had but little conversation as they prepared a silent meal. With the exception of Burley Colfaxe they were depressed with thoughts of their recent benefactor's unhappy plight—his almost certain fate.

Jeff Agnew, still seething with rage at his inability to do a thing in the Indian's behalf, growled oaths to himself as he went about the repairing of a wagon wheel rim. Glancing up suddenly, he observed the approach of Anne and Dick. He straightened his lank frame and greeted them.

"Hello, yourselves," he said, forcing a smile. "Saw you two pettin' them fine hosses Stone Thrower gave yuh. What's troublin' yuh now? I kin see yuh got

sumpin' on yore mind, Dick. Out with it!"

"We've been talkin' this over," began the boy earnestly. "It's about Stone Thrower. Something is awful wrong, Mister Agnew. Anne an' me got it figured easy enough."

"What figgered?" probed Agnew, stuffing a pipe with a mixture of bad tobacco and the pungent dried bark of the willow.

"Mister Agnew," stated Anne, determinedly, "Dick says that the officer told you his soldiers were hunting three days for the Indian who killed those people. Don't you see what that means? It couldn't be Stone Thrower!"

"No? Why not?" Jeff frowned, puzzled.

"It's simple," Anne explained. "Today is one day of the three. Last night he reached our camp—with the horses. He slept beside you. He had been two days locating our horses and driving them back to us. That's three days, isn't it?"

Agnew nodded, eyes narrowed.

"And the night before he was in our camp—sleeping," Anne went on. "He'd been watching us from that hill, you remember. And he had no horses, nothing. It was that night, the first night he ate and slept by our fire, that the soldiers claim he murdered the Peterson family."

Agnew's eyes snapped wide open and he slapped his thigh hard. "By jingo, young 'uns, I believe you've hit it right!" Then he shook his head sadly, sighed. "Ain't no use though, Anne. Too late now. They've got him an' he'll swing whether he done it or not. Likely some redskin thet looked like him. Them Injuns mostly look alike."

"I never seen one that looked like Stone Thrower!" put in Dick hotly. "Look here, Jeff, we aim to do something about this, darn it!"

"Take my advice, you two," said old Jeff, seeing Colfaxe coming toward them, "try an' fergit it all. It's too bad an' all, 'cause he was a real friend. But we can't tangle with the army over one Injun—good or bad. Go along now an' set yore wagon to rights."

Anne was downcast as she turned away with her brother, but once out of sight, behind their wagon, the boy faced her, flushed, eager. In a low voice, almost a whisper, he hurriedly outlined the plan he had formed. There was an excited discussion for many minutes, at last a final agreement, almost reluctant on the part of the brother. No fellow's sister had ever done such a thing as she proposed. He wondered uneasily how it would come out.

DARKNESS masked their silent figures as they slipped carefully from their wagon toward the picketed horses. Dick swiftly caught Anne's palomino and his own silver gray. Both were nervous, excited as Dick saddled the animals and boosted Anne up. Then, gently, he mounted the silver stallion, caught hold of Anne's reins and guided the girl's mount through the blackness.

"You shouldn't come, Anne," whispered the boy as they felt the trail beneath them. "We might run into Injuns or somethin'."

"Hurry, now," countered Anne. "We may never find those soldiers now, with the start they have. Don't fuss, Dick. Lead the way."

"Come then," agreed the boy, thudding his heels into his eager mount. "Hold a tight rein, an' keep close to me. The horses'll stick to the trail."

Like two ghosts, one silvery gray, the other a pale creamy streak, the boy and the girl plunged into the night of the great wilderness. The wind tore at their homely clothing, whipped the manes and tails of their steeds, whistled in their ears. Mud and stones flew from the racing hoofs, as on and on they thundered.

Neither spoke. No word was needed. They were the avengers now, the white boy and his sister, bent on rescue, on saving a strange savage from the hangman's rope. As they slipped through the shades of the mountain-valley night, they heard the far cry of the panther; they shivered to the yipping howl of a wolf pack as the long fangs snapped at the heels of running elk. Small creatures scurried from their path, but they raced on. On toward Ft. Bridger to save a friend.

V

LIEUTENANT JAY MEANEY, in charge of the detachment of soldiers sent out by General Reynal to run down

the murderers of the Peterson family, was in high spirits when his men made camp. He had met success on his first detail. He had determined the facts of the massacre, had hunted down the culprit, and now he was returning with his prisoner.

Stone Thrower, a peculiar Indian, indeed, Meaney had decided, remained silent, riding with downcast eyes. He did not even resent the taunts or the occasional prods of the soldiers' rifles.

"He'll come out with it," said the lieutenant to his sergeant that night after the capture. "The general will frighten him pale."

Around their fire that night the soldiers and their civilian reinforcements and guides talked late. Stone Thrower, bound fast, lay listening. His captors believed him a savage with but little knowledge of the white man's language and they spoke of things that caused Stone Thrower to smolder with concealed rage. He heard them tell of the Peterson massacre, heard the name of the man who had seen the killer at his ghastly work. That informant was an Indian himself—a Brule. And a white man spoke his name: Limping Wolf.

"So—!" Stone Thrower's muscles heaved at his irons, and a soldier turned to him, lazily.

"What's that, Injun? What you sayin' thar?"

"Stone Thrower not speak. Have pain," he grunted brokenly.

"Yore pain won't last long," the soldier chuckled. "Dead Injuns is good Injuns."

But Stone Thrower had heard what he wanted. Limping Wolf! The vile Brule, the red man he sought for the slaughter of his little mother, Two Fawns. And Limping Wolf, these men were saying, was in a Ute camp on the Big Sandy.

To escape, to break free of his bonds, to flee from his captors—to get his horse between his knees and ride—what wouldn't he give to be granted these things! But try as he would, Stone Thrower was guarded too closely. All night he lay beneath the tarpaulin, listening to the mumbling of the men and the roar of the mountain storm. Then, in the morning, the soldiers moved on with him. Through the downpour, slopping along in a sea of mire, the Indian saw the miles lengthen, his fate drawing nearer. But he refused to give up hope.

"Before I die," he swore solemnly, with the rain beating on his bronzed face, "I will face Limping Wolf."

THAT night he watched his chance. The storm still raged in fits and squalls and the wind howled like a lost soul wandering the high mountain trails. The trails he loved; trails that led to the north, to the Crow homeland along the Powder. . . .

The fire died swiftly under the pelting of the rain. Darkness was everywhere. Blackness. Stone Thrower felt the sweat ooze from his flesh as he worked, grimly, silently. The tortures of a fiery hell shot up his arms. He gritted his teeth, his lips pressed tight, while he pulled, pulled. The iron bands, rough and crude, tore at his hands as he worked them down. His eyes watched the sleeping, snoring soldiery, the busybody civilians. If he could get them off—*if!*—what if the price were his own blood and the flesh of his leathery hands? Two Fawns would be avenged. Then the Crow wanderer would find the White Lily, Anne Morrison, and say what a man must say to the woman of his choosing.

Warm blood ran to his fingertips. The smell of it drove the Indian to a silent fury of effort. One of the bands, sticky, was over his thumb joint—was off! Like a madman Stone Thrower tore at the other. As the night wore on and the rain and wind and thunder filled his ears he thanked the brave God of the red man for the noise of the storm, drowning the little whispers of agony that he could not hold back.

Both hands were scratched, swollen and bleeding when Stone Thrower crept stealthily from his black shelter. But he had recovered his rifle and his knife, and he carried the blanket the soldiers had furnished him. Through the dim, changing night depths he crawled, making no sound, to where the guard held the mounts of the party.

"Too dark," he muttered softly. "Not even a Crow could see tonight."

To find his own splendid horse was impossible by sight. But the Crow knew another way. Locating the drowsing guard, he crawled slowly around the horse herd to the windward of the animals. He

halted there, listening keenly. Soon he heard the movement among the horses, a low sound that was half snort, half whinny. Then a horse's hoofs moving toward him. He put out a hand gently, whispering in the Crow tongue. The velvet black muzzle touched his arm, brushed his dripping face. Quickly then he flung the blanket on the animal's back, sprang gingerly on, and with a shrill, fierce, stampeding yell, he sprang away into the night amid a wild rush of frightened horses, surprised soldiers and the storm that shrieked and thundered.

Straight into the hills he rode—with the rain to wash out his trail and defy the soldiers. Their curses were following him, he knew, and he grinned with satisfaction. High in the hills he hunted the darkness for the shelter of an overhanging rock and there he waited for the day. The new dawn found him searching the land below him. Far away he could see the flat where the troopers had camped. But of soldiers there was no sign. Stone Thrower smiled, for he knew their plight and their rage. They had let "an Injun" outwit them.

ABRUPTLY, he turned his sharp eyes toward the rutted overland trail between two close-lying hills. Along it were racing two swift horses. The Indian stiffened, swung about and sprang to the back of his astonished black. With a drumming of heels he sent the beast flying down the rough, boulder-strewn path.

"The palomino," Stone Thrower was saying aloud to himself in the reckless dash for the trail. "And the silver horse. There are no two horses like them. Something has happened."

Risking a broken leg for his mount, the Indian thundered down the grooving valley to head off the brother and sister. It could not be anyone else, and the knowledge thrilled the Crow to his very marrow. They would meet again—he and the yellow-haired one.

The black stretched out like an antelope, sending startled deer in flight for the brush. Coming out on a slight rise of ground, Stone Thrower glanced quickly to his right, saw Anne and Dick, lifted his horse with his knees to a climbing, wheeling halt, and raising one hand high.

She saw him almost at once, caught her breath and her eyes filled with wonder. "Dick," she cried, panting. "Look! It's Stone Thrower!" Together they wheeled their lathered horses and rode toward the Indian as he came down to meet them. The Indian's face was knotted with grave concern.

"You, Anne, my friend, and Dick!" he said. "Why do you ride alone where your life is in danger? What has happened?"

"We were coming to help you," gasped Dick, observing the bloody hands of their friend. "We left the wagons in the dark and—"

"Yes," said Anne, blushing a little at Stone Thrower's keen glance. "It's true, Stone Thrower. Dick planned to catch up the soldiers and help you to get free. You see, we know you didn't kill the Petersons."

Stone Thrower tensed himself, his brain afire, staring at the white girl. Words he had never used, words he had only heard from the mouths of white men far away in the north, struggled for utterance on his lips. But he felt, too, the uselessness of it all: he was a red man, a Crow, she a beautiful white woman.

"Stone Thrower's heart is glad but his brain is in a cloud," he managed to say, still looking at Anne. "You see, I have escaped. I am free again, as free as I was that first night by your campfire." He urged his horse around, beckoning to them. "We will ride toward your friends. I will guide you—there may be warriors to pass."

"We saw them," declared Dick. "We ran smack dab into a whole tribe crossin' the trail about thirty miles back, but we dashed right through them so fast they never got started. Ain't no horses can hold a candle to Anne's an' mine."

Stone Thrower shook his head, worried. He agreed to accompany the sister and brother to within sight of their wagon train, but then he must ride to the village of Limping Wolf's friends. He had a sworn duty to perform.

"But you will return—later?" insisted Anne. "Mister Agnew says he will turn off from Sublette's crossing, and go by way of Fort Bridger if we can prove your innocence to General Philip Reynal, who is in command of the soldiers here. You must come back, Stone Thrower, and

travel with us to the fort. Then you can be cleared of this ridiculous charge."

The Indian rode for many miles in thoughtful silence, alert to the menace of forest trails and brush-clad hills. Twice his quick eyes spotted roving bands of redskins in the distance. When, at last, he pointed to the slow-moving wagons of Jeff Agnew's little party and bade them farewell, it was with the promise that he would find them again.

"Watch well over your sister, Dick," he cautioned the lad. "If trouble comes, put her on the palomino. No horse in the world could overtake her on his back—except perhaps your silver stallion."

He reached out and shook Dick's hand. The boy mumbled something, his lips trembling, as he saw the bruised bronze hand clasp his sister's.

"Good-bye, Stone Thrower, again," said Anne, smiling.

Then, she had swung her horse, Dick following with a backward wave, and they were racing away down the long slope to catch the Agnew wagons. From the hill crest Stone Thrower watched them ride, his heart and brain in a turmoil of strange emotions. Could it be possible that she was right—that the mountain men were right—that he was not a Crow brave at all, but a white man born? To feel such things and know them was not the way of an Indian.

THERE were almost forty lodges in the Ute village up the Big Sandy under the sheltering shoulder of Fat Woman Hill. Stone Thrower, lean as a panther, watched the people from behind a boulder, his searching eyes probing the blanketed figures for one man. The visiting Brule Sioux must be inside one of the *tipis*. Stone Thrower chuckled. Limping Wolf would be owl-eyed at sight of him . . . he must even now be thinking that the Crow was a prisoner of the white soldiers —perhaps dead. Stone Thrower began now to creep and crawl cautiously down through the cover toward the *tipis*. He must be careful of the sharp-nosed dogs.

Behind a thick-trunked pine he crouched. His moccasined feet made no sound, even his breathing was hushed as he listened to the patter of the Ute children, the guttural talking of men and women moving about among the *tipis*. There was no sign of Limping Wolf. Perhaps the Brule had left the Big Sandy, feeling safe; ridden northward. What if the white man had been wrong—or lied purposely? The smoke of the fires and the smell of buffalo and deer meat cooking drifted to the nostrils of the crouching Crow. He saw a horseman, all but naked, come charging into the camp, calling a name, and tried to catch the meaning.

Suddenly then, the village sprang to life. Feathered braves emerged from the dark interior of their skin shelters. The voice of the news bearer was flung toward Stone Thrower. He heard the shout of another, turned his head.

Limping Wolf had come weaving from a sub-chief's *tipi*, red-eyed and angry. He faced the rider on the dusty horse. "Word comes," cried the rider, "that your enemy, the Crow, escaped from the soldiers. What now, Limping Wolf?"

"Escaped?" The Brule had been drinking on a bottle of trade whiskey and his temper was flaming. "The carrion eater! I, Limping Wolf, will find him. I will hunt him out of the hills and deal him the blow myself. His scalp-lock will be carried to the chief of the white soldiers as proof that Stone Thrower is dead."

It was too much for Stone Thrower. No Crow ever feared the cowardly skulking Utes, much less a cowardly Brule. Stone Thrower rose to his full height, an imposing figure. He carried only a hunting knife in his belt—the rifle he had left by his picketed horse. Now he strode boldly down through the brush, out into the open, entered the village, passing the first of the buffalo hide *tipis*. Only then did a Ute notice his presence, and called out "How!"

"Ho!" shouted Stone Thrower, pointing toward Limping Wolf. "I am Stone Thrower, the Crow. The avenger!" As he snarled the words he was not sure of himself, sure that he was a Crow; whether he was a red man or a white. But he remembered the gentle Two Fawns, and his blue eyes glittered fiercely as the crowded Utes turned toward him. Limping Wolf turned, too, recognized the Crow instantly. He saw that Stone Thrower was not armed. He carried only a knife.

In a flash, Limping Wolf let out a yell that set the village dogs to barking. He

saw the Crow's hand reach toward the knife, felt terror at sight of the gleaming blade. With a shout of triumph he snatched a long bow from a Ute's hand, grabbed for an arrow from a quiver at the brave's shoulder. And in that first moment the tall Crow warrior snatched a stone from his path, a smooth, round stone, and threw it. Straight as a bullet it flew, so swift, so true.

"For a wolf with poisoned fangs!" cried Stone Thrower as he hurled the missile.

Full center of Limping Wolf's forehead it struck and there was a smashing sound like the crunch of bark beneath the hoof of a pony. The Utes cried out in astonishment, awed by the daring and the skill of the Crow. Amazement gripped them, held them motionless as the Indian from Powder River leaped with knife in hand upon the downed Brule. Quick and true he drove the blade, then plunged through the startled spectators to race away between the *tipis* to the brush-covered slope. Before they could collect their scattered wits he had vanished. They stared at the brush, looked down at the dead Limping Wolf. At his hair.

The Crow had not wanted his scalp! They shouted obscene curses after Stone Thrower. To leave them a dead Sioux, one not worth scalping. At last aroused, they ran for the brush, hunted vainly for his sign. But Stone Thrower was gone. He left no trail as he sped to his horse and led the animal over steel-hard ground and rock-strewn paths. He thrilled at the power of his mighty arm, at the speed of his lithe limbs. And he laughed grimly at the baffled Utes.

Little Two Fawns was avenged, her place in the other world assured by the son who had blue eyes and reddish hair. The son they had rightly named Stone Thrower. Once, when a mere child, he had thrown a stone. It killed a wildcat. The Crows feared a stone in his hand.

Riding the black horse, Stone Thrower traveled a circuitous route, winding through tiny valleys and canyons, crossing many nameless small streams, his face toward the setting sun. If his medicine was good he would overtake Jeff Agnew's trail somewhere between the Green River and Ham's Fork, though neither of these names was known to him at the time.

Jeff Agnew's wagon train. The white people. Anne.

VI

SEVEN days had passed since he had sighted any men other than Indians. Stone Thrower watched from the protection of a willow thicket as a plodding, creaking caravan of wagons came in sight. A large party had passed through the trail that morning earlier. He read the sign. This one coming promised to bring the face he sought. But he was wary. Soldiers might still be searching for him.

"I will surrender with her," he told himself thoughtfully while he watched the approaching train. "I will go with the girl and her friends. They are my friends." He saw the horses dragging the heavy wagons nearer, saw the figure of a man on the lead wagon take shape. A smile lighted the face of Stone Thrower. It was Agnew, grizzled, honest Agnew. The Crow medicine was good.

Mounting his horse, the Indian rode out into the trail. He raised a hand. "How, friend!" he shouted, at which Agnew's quick eyes brightened. He yelled at his horses and tugged at the reins.

"Hi, pardner," bellowed Agnew. "Glad to see yuh again."

There was a squeal of brakes down along the train, and the rifles of the men, raised threateningly a moment before, were lowered as they recognized their Crow friend. Stone Thrower sat his horse and talked with Agnew hurriedly, urging him to continue, if possible, to reach the Fork before camping for the night.

"It's quite a piece," demurred Agnew.

"Many wagons are ahead of you," said the Indian. "My eyes tell me it is a strong train. They are not far."

"Mormons," nodded Agnew. "Good fighting men, too. We'd rather keep our distance."

"But there is danger, friend," frowned Stone Thrower. "I have seen red men in great numbers. They may cross the trail." He motioned ahead. "The war clouds are gathering."

"You're a good friend," smiled Agnew, cracking his whip to put the teams into their collars. "You're riding along with us, hey?"

"Yes," replied Stone Thrower. "I go with you—with Anne's friends—to the fort. Some day—" His voice was lost to Old Jeff as the train started onward. Stone Thrower had swung his horse about and was riding down along the line of wagons, his next halt evident.

Anne saw him approach, quickly straightened her sunbonnet, trying to fathom the rapid beating of her heart, the depth of happiness she felt in the return of this wilderness man. Why did she allow herself to be so concerned over an Indian, a savage? Strange thoughts rushed through her brain as the bronzed rider neared her wagon. Had she lost her mind? Indians—his kind—were killing white people all across the frontier. Soldiers were coming out here, more each year, to put down the bloody war ax and the scalping knife.

"Hello," called Stone Thrower, his imposing figure in fringed buckskin filling her thoughtful eyes. "You see, I have returned. I am going with you to the fort."

"I am very glad, Stone Thrower," she replied. "You are a man of your word." She did not ask him about his mission. "We all admire your courage." His blue eyes held her gaze for a moment, and she was glad that one of her horses stumbled so that she could busy herself with the driving. "My brother is behind with the spare stock."

Stone Thrower nodded.

They were approaching a shadowy narrow groove in the hills, a winding deep-rutted passage that hugged the bank of a stream. The Indian, with a smile, sent his horse down the line to greet Dick Morrison. He said "How" and smiled as he passed each successive team, noting the black look shot at him by the man whose name he knew was Colfaxe. Child of the forest that he was, Stone Thrower was at a loss for the gruff, even surly, manner of Colfaxe.

However, his momentary pondering of the man's attitude was ended suddenly. As he rode up to Dick, the first wagon of the train, the one driven by Jeff Agnew himself, had emerged from the narrow defile and reached the opening of the broad valley beyond. Almost as if at a signal, the mountain fastness exploded with a thunderous volley of rifle fire mingled with the shrill, terrorizing yells of Indians.

Agnew's yell of warning was echoed by the men and women of his party. In a glance Agnew saw that the savages were on all sides, a yelling horde, and that not only had they trapped them, but also the Mormons up ahead. Only a couple of miles ahead was the train they followed, halted and forted up in a circle, rifle smoke billowing in the wind as the pioneer men made a brave stand.

In a fleeting glance Stone Thrower saw the situation, knew its end—unless strategy could intercede for the white people. "Utes!" he cried out. "Ride to your sister's side, Dick, swiftly. Shoot as you never shot before. I go to try their own medicine on these dogs!"

As the boy jumped his horse forward, he saw in amazement that Stone Thrower was plunging his black into the stream, heading for the steep brush-covered slope opposite. Was he a coward after all? wondered Dick. Or was it that he, an Indian, could not bring himself to shoot his red brothers? But then Dick forgot him in a breath as he rushed to the wagon where his sister drove with one hand, a rifle in the other. The Agnew train had suddenly folded up on itself, the rear wagons pushing in tightly behind those in front, all wedged in the narrow pass, some still crowded at the entrance.

THE valley was a scene of terror. From all directions the warriors converged on the trains, the one ahead bearing the brunt of the attack in the open. Agnew's train had not proceeded fast enough to roll full into the trap, being slowed by the tree-choked pass. This was fortunate, as it enabled them to make a stand with the racing Indians on one side only.

"They'll slaughter them fellers ahead," whined Gover, his smoking rifle hot in his hands. "Then they'll surround us here in this ditch."

"We got a good position," snapped Agnew. "Shut up an' keep yore eyes skinned." He drew a bead on a galloping pinto, waiting for the horse to swing into line so the buck hanging to the opposite side would come into line. *"Bram!"* The long rifle spoke with the voice of doom, echoing against the steep hill sides like

the crash of a lightning bolt. The warrior fell. "Four, by cracky!" cried Jeff. "Say, where's Stone Thrower?"

No one answered. Smoke rolled like low-hung clouds along the valley floor, half obscuring the battle of the train ahead. Over it all the mountain sun shone warmly, smiling down on this grim, bloody struggle. And no man could see high enough or far enough through the dust or smoke to observe the solitary figure high on a cliff top that fringed the valley on the north.

"That lousy Crow buck was yeller as a Chinese," growled Burley Colfaxe, reloading his hot rifle. "Run first smell of trouble." He looked across at Anne, to be sure she had heard him, raised his voice: "Yep, Stone Thrower don't b'lieve in old-fashioned ideas like protectin' the women. He saves hisself. Probably forty mile away by now."

The girl shot a withering glance at him but said nothing.

It was Broughton who saw the turn of the tide first. He shouted: "Look at that! The Injuns are drawin' off! An' the firin' up ahead at them other wagons is stoppin'. Hear that?"

Jeff Agnew stood up cautiously, eyes shaded. Broughton was right.

"They're scared of somethin'," yelled Dick Morrison, running up with rifle at ready. "See them gatherin' together. They're on the run."

By the score the savages were running, mounted and afoot, toward a far-away gap in the mountains northward. The shooting had ceased and the settlers wiped streaked faces, unconsciously glancing skyward to thank their Maker for their deliverance. It was as she lifted her face thus that Anne saw the tiny moving figure against the sky, perched high on a cliff. An Indian. A blanket waved and whipped in his expert hands, darting up and down, right and left, leaping like a thing alive. Below, in the valley, a big band of frightened Utes watched that blanket as they hurried off.

"Something's gone wrong fer them, thank the good Lord," breathed Jeff Agnew. "Whatever it is, we're saved."

Agnew roused them to get moving. Four horses of the first wagon, being out in front and unprotected, were dead. These had to be cut loose and replaced.

Puzzled and still wary, the train began again to move forward, soon afterward reaching the party ahead of them. Here they learned that Indian bullets and arrows had cut down half a score of the men defenders, slaughtered a dozen horses and led cattle.

"What say if we combine, pardner?" suggested Jeff Agnew readily. "We'll both be stronger in case of more trouble. Which way yuh goin'?"

"Was goin' by way the Humboldt," announced a fellow who was called Dutch Wagner. "We got bad luck, all the way. Three times we hafta fight Injuns."

"If yuh agree to—" Agnew paused, reflectively, cast a look around him. "I wuz goin 'to say we wuz plannin' to stop over at Fort Bridger but I guess—"

Anne spoke up quickly: "Don't change your plans. Stone Thrower will go there with us." She was pointing far back along the valley floor and the combined parties followed her pointing. Coming toward them on a dead run was a black horse with one white forefoot and on it was a figure they knew. Stone Thrower. He was riding like the wind, sitting the horse like a centaur.

"It's him all right," agreed Agnew, puzzled. "Funny 'bout him. Where yuh suppose he vamoosed to when the shootin' started?"

Colfaxe sneered openly. "Whyn't yuh ask him point blank?"

In a cloud of dust the Crow slid to a halt, and Anne heard one of the other wagon party say: "First time I ever see a Injun come down offa hoss on the near side. Just like a white man, by gosh!"

"Stone Thrower!" roared Jeff Agnew as the Indian strode silently toward them. "Where did you go? Why did you run away?"

The Indian's expression was unsmiling. "One more rifle against many Utes is nothing, my friends," he said, gravely. "A Crow does not run from a thousand Utes. Stone Thrower went to air his blanket in the sun."

Anne cried out eagerly: "It was you! You waved the blanket high up there on that cliff? Oh, Stone Thrower, white men are all fools. But how did you do it? You signaled some message?"

The blue eyes of the big Crow twinkled and he smiled warmly. She, at least, understood, trusting him. "Yes," he said to his circle of listeners, "I lied to the Utes. I signaled to them that the soldiers were coming—many soldiers—as many as the buffalo that used to thunder across these valleys. I told them to escape while there was yet time, or they would be surrounded by ten thousand white troopers who came to wipe them out."

They surrounded Stone Thrower now, men and women alike, grasping his bruised and scarred hands, filling his ears with words of thanks.

"But you must get on," he warned them. "Must hurry on before the Ute has time to learn that he has been fooled."

VII

LUMBERING along behind their heaving teams the wagons of the combined trains fought mountain streams and sloughs where the wheels sank hub-deep and where men dug and tugged with ropes to keep the train rolling. They were in the vast grandeur of the great Rockies now, green clad with forests of evergreen, white capped with snows that never melted. By night they camped within a huge circle of forted wagons, the stock and the campfires, fenced against marauding redskins. By day they plodded stubbornly, watchful of every clump of trees, every gully.

Stone Thrower rode in the shadow of Anne Morrison's wagon, a silent bronzed figure whose thoughts were masked by a stoic reserve, whose brain was graven each day deeper by the face of the white girl near him. Often, as he sat the black, scanning the peaks and the passes, he pondered the future. Where would he go and what would he do? He was an Indian, a red man. Far north, among the Crows, he remembered white men who had taken Crow maidens for their wives. But never had he known a white woman to take an Indian for a husband.

It was just the same thing, he decided; only turned about. If, perhaps, when they had passed Fort Bridger, he should declare himself, she would listen to him. He could go with them to California, become a white man, live like one, work like one, toiling in the fields . . . digging the gold about which they talked. White men had always interested him at home. He'd always felt drawn toward them—even the greasy, bearded, tobacco-chewing mountain clan. Was it because he was destined to meet this white angel, to renounce his Crow mother and father for her?

"See, Stone Thrower!" called Anne one day as he rode near her wagon. "You said you lied to Utes. But you didn't. Soldiers are coming."

One look was enough for him. He was all Indian again, his wrists still scarred from soldier irons. His first thought was "They are hunting Stone Thrower." She saw him stiffen, his knees grab his mount. Another moment and he would be gone.

"No!" she cried. "No, you must stay! Quick, climb into the back of my wagon! Cover yourself there among the things. They will not see you and will go by."

To hide, to bury himself among the wagon's contents, was the way of a burrowing prairie dog who scurried from sight. But he could not refuse the urgent bidding of the girl. While she kept her eyes on the mounted soldiers coming up on the left flank of the train, the Indian climbed swiftly from his horse to the end gate of the wagon, disappearing quickly in its shadowy depths. Burley Colfaxe, witnessing the incident from his trailing wagon seat, grimaced, his sharp black eyes lighting with a cruel resolve.

"Hold up there," came the shout of one of the soldiers, waving a pistol toward the wagon train. Agnew and his party recognized the man instantly. It was the red-faced sergeant whom they had met before. He evidently was in charge of the detail. There was no lieutenant this time.

The sergeant called irately, "Seen anything of a half a dozen white men hereabouts? Bad-lookin' gents, one of 'em with only one arm?"

Broughton, whose wagon was nearest, shouted back. "Nothin' but Injuns. Why the hell don't you fellers show up when we're in real trouble?"

The sergeant grew redder. He rode up close, his followers spread along the train, eyeing the travelers. "Fought Injuns, yuh say?" bawled the sergeant, then, "Hey, ain't you people the ones we met way back beyond the Green . . . been shelterin' that Crow buck we caught?"

Jeff Agnew had marched back from his wagon and put in now angrily: "Look here, Sergeant," he snarled at the three-striper. "Don't try threatenin' my party with any gun wavin'. We don't have to stop for you ner nobody, less we wants to. What you hopin' to find this time?"

The soldier grinned down at the grim old fellow. "Don't go to rarin' up, old-timer," he said. "We're huntin' a bunch o' white gents. Been holdin' up wagon trains west of here. Yuh see 'em?"

"No," growled Agnew, turning back toward his own team. "And it sure beats me how—"

A shout from one of the sergeant's men cut Agnew short, and a voice rose in a cry of discovery. "Hey, Sarge!" yelled a soldier who had been inspecting the train for want of anything else to do, his eyes being especially concerned with winking at the women of the party. Now he had found something. "Hey, Sarge! Lookit this hoss!"

The attention of everyone was turned down the train, where, tied by a rawhide rein to Anne's wagon, was a black horse with one white forefoot. On its back was a blanket. The soldier had his hand on this, feeling it, mumbling to the horse to stand still.

"It's that Crow's hoss," he called out as the others came up. "'Member him? The one that slipped his irons that night an' stampeded our animals?"

"Yeah," answered the sergeant. "Same hoss."

"Blanket's warm, too," added the enlisted man, astutely. "Ain't just sun. Somebody's been ridin' this hoss damn lately."

"What about that, miss?" demanded the sergeant. "You claim you ain't seen the Injun?"

STONE THROWER, crouched beneath bundles and blankets inside the wagon, tensed himself as he peered out through a tiny fold. He heard it all; he saw the heads of the horses behind them, the face of the man on the next wagon. It was Burley Colfaxe, his sullen, black bearded scowl lighted by a devilish grin now. He heard the sergeant fire the direct question at Anne Morrison, and he felt like a cowardly cub that crawls behind its mother when danger approaches. Would the girl give him away now, weaken before the power of the government's soldiers? There was a tense moment of silence, then came an angry voice. Young Dick Morrison had arrived.

"Get away from this wagon," he shouted at the troopers. "Leave my sister alone." The boy had courage, nerve. "You tin soldiers ain't got savvy enough to ketch a sage hen on a nest. You an' yore rockin' hosses kin—"

Jeff Agnew shoved him away with a command for silence, turned to the seething soldiers. As his lips opened to speak, he caught sight of Colfaxe, standing up, one foot on the dashboard of the wagon. Colfaxe was beckoning to the sergeant. Stone Thrower saw him, too, saw the furtive, wolfish gleam in the white man's eyes. Agnew rushed forward to head the soldier off, but Colfaxe was pointing now. His voice was triumphant: "In that wagon, Sergeant," he was saying. "I think I saw the damn redskin sneaking in there. Whyn't yuh dig him out like a weasel?"

"Huh! In the wagon, eh? Shoulda thought of that," the sergeant waved an arm to his men and they rushed for the wagon gate. "Suppose that gal was hidin' him."

Stone Thrower saw the blue clad figures climbing up to route him out and he saw in a quick flash the grin of calm satisfaction on Colfaxe's face. The white man had proved a false friend, a traitor, but he would not be forgotten. Nor would a Crow be taken now without a fight.

As the men piled into the crowded Conestoga, the Indian leaped forth like a catamount, the keen blade in his hand glimmering. But even as quick as the Indian, one of the soldiers fastened himself on the knife arm, and with three others they bore the Crow backward and down among the bags and boxes. A fierce struggle ensued, amid grunts and gasps, the sharp bitter oaths of the white men and the guttural grunts of Stone Thrower who, in an instant, had reverted to the Crow tongue.

The odds, however, were too many. A white hand flipped the Indian knife over the tail gate, and four strong, red-faced troopers dragged the jerking, kicking Crow from the wagon into the now curious assemblange. Anne stood there as he was

pulled forth, his buckskin shirt torn from his bronze body, his throat encircled by the blue arm of a soldier. One glimpse she got, her wide blue eyes nearing tears. She saw him grappled by a dozen angry hands, his broad brown back a bunch of sinewy muscles and she started, flung a hand to her mouth. Just above his rawhide belt and under his ribs on the left side were four blue-black marks close together. Battle scars, she told herself. Like the tattooing she had seen on a bull skinner's forearm once at Independence.

"Stand him up!" barked the sergeant, well pleased with his prize. "Git on yore feet, Injun."

Stone Thrower's face was impassive, but his eyes warned them. The soldiers pulled the ropes tighter, binding his arms behind him this time. This time he wouldn't work free.

"I'm puttin' yore whole party under arrest," declared the non-commissioned officer importantly. "You'll all come on into the fort. General Reynal'll say what'll be done with yuh. Aidin' a army prisoner to escape is a damn serious offense."

"Under arrest?" Jeff Agnew fumed, stamping about. "Why you damn young pug nosed *pup,* we wuz goin' to the fort anyways, an' he"—pointing to the Indian —"wuz goin' with us. We kin prove he never kilt them Petersons at all."

The soldier glanced toward Colfaxe, who stared peculiarly away over the jagged mountain range. "What d'yuh say, mister?"

Colfaxe shrugged, looked toward Anne, at the Indian. "We are all under arrest, you said," he jockeyed nervously. "We will have a chance to tell our stories at the fort. Personally, I think Miss Morrison should be left out of this. I'll assume responsibility for her."

"Why, you dirty hairy faced baboon!" cried young Dick angrily, "I'd rather feed her to a grizzly. Keep her name offa yore slimy tongue if yuh know what's good for yuh!"

Old Jeff Agnew swung about on the crowd, pierced the sergeant with challenging eyes. "Come on, Little Boy Blue, get this train movin'. We're yore prisoners an' we demand yuh take us to Fort Bridger!"

DURING the days and nights that followed the wagons with their soldier guard skirted the glaring desert, and drove their way to the Black River. Stone Thrower, brooding and silent, was guarded carefully, his bonds loosened only to eat and then under the rifle of a soldier.

The sight of Fort Bridger roused them at last to a cheery cry of relief. The fort, neither a military post nor actually a fort at all, loomed up suddenly in the distance through the rising haze of a mid-morning march. Dutch Wagner, leading the first contingent, stood up on his wagon platform and shouted, "The fort!" There was an excited echo of voices down along the wagon line as eyes were shaded to see.

"That it?" called Agnew to one of the troopers near him.

"That's it," was the gruff reply. "An' you fellers'll sit in the calabozo, too."

Agnew spat into the dust and swore. The horses were being lashed anxiously now, and the emigrants, to the last child, drew deep breaths. Rest for weary bones and safety. Vigilance could be relaxed. Many of the settlers turned their eyes toward the tightly bound Indian riding the black horse and surrounded by dust-streaked soldiers.

Stone Thrower's face did not change. He saw the log and 'dobe buildings growing larger, noted the small figures moving about, something waving from a naked pole. He steeled himself.

"Now for white man's justice," he mused. Everyone was pushing his team, driving spare animals, cracking whips. The sounds of a soldier bugle blared out against the clear blue of the sky. Men could be seen sauntering into view, watching the approach of the train. From the southeast out of the rugged hills were coming, too, a long string of pack horses and men in buckskin. On the packs were great chunks of raw meat, buffalo meat. The men were hunters returning from the kill.

Into Fort Bridger rolled the wagons of Wagner and Agnew and almost before the settlers knew it they were surrounded by a motley assortment of bearded white men, swarthy breeds, soldiers and Indians. Stone Thrower was snaked from his horse and hustled off to a long low building of crumbling 'dobe.

Padre John Foley, the desert priest,

moved about among the weary travelers, smiling a welcome, shaking toil worn hands, his gentle kindly manner soothing even to the roughest of the wayfarers. "You, too, my friend," he smiled as Agnew grumbling, stood gazing about, "have reached the crossroads, brother. A long and hazardous journey is behind you. Whither goest thou? To Oregon or California?"

"Californy, Father," replied old Jeff, "the Lord willin'. But we're in trouble first off. Mebbe you kin help us some." And he quickly told the padre their story, recounting their meeting with the Indian, his service, his friendship and his plight. Before he had finished Anne joined them, her concern, her earnestness lending weight.

"I saw your friend," the padre nodded when Agnew had finished. "He is a strange appearing fellow with his blue eyes. We shall see what we can do."

"And red hair, Father," put in Anne. "I wondered many times if he is really an Indian at all."

"Hummm," murmured the priest. "Blue eyes and red hair. Very strange. But come with me. We will go to General Reynal's quarters."

Stone Thrower offered no resistance in the dingy mud-plastered room where a half dozen soldiers stripped him down to his breech-clout, searching for hidden weapons, a secreted knife.

Almost naked, his bearskin hat and feathers removed, the Crow presented a strange picture with his reddish hair and the glittering blue of his eyes. "Why not skin me?" he taunted his guards as a savage smile hid his rage at the affront to his Crow dignity.

"We'll skin yuh later," laughed a soldier. "Say, how come yuh got such hair an' eyes, Injun. Got some white blood, huh?"

"How come you have black eyes, soldier," countered Stone Thrower coldly. "Got some Injun blood?"

The troopers roared with laughter, all except the black eyed one. He swore, made a move as if to strike the Indian, but as he did the door opened and an orderly entered. "Hey, you horse killers, the General says to bring over the Injun. That him?"

A grunt answered the orderly, and two of the troppers beckoned to their captive. "Come along, Stone Thrower. We'll salt yore hash now."

Stone Thrower marched readily between the pair, who pushed out into the open, moving rapidly through the gaping spectators. Breeds and full-bloods sat or stood about lazily, smoking, their eyes alone alive. One among these, an old, very old, squaw, huddling in a blanket beside a weathered plank door, raised her wrinkled brows suddenly as the Crow prisoner passed. Her quick glance noted his red hair, the odd blue eyes. Swiftly she twisted her neck to follow, saw the bronzed back with its four small scars. Her mouth dropped open and her deep-set eyes stared.

"Ten-as le-loo!" Her cracked voice rasped. "Young wolf! *T-kope!* White!" The old squaw let loose a shriek and started to climb stiffly to her feet. The other Indians looked at her and shook their heads. Was the old hag crazy? She was standing now, her bony finger pointing to the trio entering the door of General Reynals' temporary quarters.

VIII

IT was a long, low ceiling room, with small windows cut high in the logs. The general sat behind a rough, plank table, his gray beard hiding his collar and top button of his uniform blouse. Before him stood a curious tableau which included Jeff Agnew's party, several soldiers, the padre and Stone Thrower. Lieutenant Meaney, still bitter, was nearest to his commanding officer.

General Reynal was looking at the prisoner sternly, thoughtfully. He had heard the full story, both sides. "Why, if you did not kill those people," he asked slowly, "did you bother to escape, to play hell with my soldiers?"

"An Indian," replied Stone Thrower, "is—"

There was a heavy thumping at the door and all heads turned as a trooper opened it at a nod from the general. Into the room trotted a little, withered, brown faced wisp of a man, white bearded and garbed in greasy deerskin from chin to toe. Across his shoulder was strung a long rifle and powder horn. His belt was heavy with a

knife, pistol and numerous gadgets. He dragged a beaver skin hat from his long white hair, as he was followed by an ancient Indian woman whose wide cheek bones and nose marked her with the Apache blood.

"Hello, Jim," said General Reynal, as all present stared. "What's the squaw done?"

"Nothin', Gineral," wheezed old Jim, peering through the gloom and locating the prisoner at whom he stared narrowly. "I jus' fotched her here so's yuh could see fer yerself. B'sides I'm dam-fired curious, m'self. Gineral, this squaw says yore prisoner there is—" He swung about on the old woman. "Let her do it, Gineral. See if she's lyin', though tain't sense effen she wuz, cause I seen her eyes when he passed. Show me man, squaw," he said to the woman. "You show!"

The old squaw did not need urging. Her eyes were already fixed strangely on Stone Thrower. There was something of tenderness in her watery old eyes. She edged up to him now, peered into the face of the prisoner, searchingly, her bony hands trembling and lips moving but soundless. Finally she nodded and edged around him until, bending but little, she pointed to the scars on his back. She put her finger on him, covering one of the four marks, and turned her face to the general, who was watching with keen interest.

"T-kope!" she shouted in a high piercing voice that startled the room. "Him—*t-kope!"* She indicated the marks with her finger. *"Ten-as le-loo!"*

General Reynal frowned, turned to Old Jim, the trapper. Stone Thrower raised his brows; he knew the jargon she spoke, but was puzzled. He saw the quickening brightness of Anne's wide eyes and felt the tension of the whole room.

"What does she say, Jim?" demanded the officer. "What is the meaning of this, anyway?"

"She says this hombre is a white man!" Old Jim's words struck like a thunder clap over the gathering. "Those scars, she says, be the teeth marks of a wolf cub. He was a white boy, Gineral. Stole by Apaches on the San Pedro twenty year ago."

"Twenty years," the officer mumbled the words softly, reflectively, and a thick stillness settled over the long log-walled room. Padre John's mellow voice could now be heard as he gently grasped the groping outstretched hand of Anne and said: "Be patient, my child. God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. Be calm." The girl was breathing deeply, struggling to restrain the pent-up emotions of these months along the trail, to still the voice that cried out in her heart. Her eyes, a-glimmer with tears of joy, were unashamed as those around her watched. Stone Thrower was a white man!

"How does she know this, Jim?" probed the General, leaning closer on his table, his eyes fixed steadily on the bronzed youth. "That is a long time."

"She's a Mimbreno Apache," explained the wizened trapper.

"Colorado!" shouted the old squaw in a cracked voice. She pointed eagerly to the prisoner's hair. *"Colorado!"*

"Means red, Gineral." Old Jim glowered at the woman and went on hurriedly. "This boy's hair is *colorado,* see. She says tuh me, the 'Paches scalped his maw and paw. The kid was on'y a shaver, three, four year old. She found him in the ruins of the cabin. I 'member the time. Was when Gineral Kearney was roundin' up the 'Paches. A feller name of Jack Brainard had a li'l' rancho on the San Pedro. Had a red-headed wife. She gimme a mess of vittles once. By damn—beg pardon, Padre John—they had a red-headed baby. A boy. Seen him m'self."

"You think this young man is—" The general eyed old Jim.

"I knows it," shouted the trapper. "It's Pete Brainard's kid. I kin see him now right there, standin'."

"Then how," insisted the soldier, "does he claim to be a Crow?"

"SHE says," declared the old fellow, "this is him. She knows them teeth scars. Says the kid was bit by a wolf cub in their camp. Then one day when they wuz gittin' run ragged by Kearney's soldiers, her husband sold the boy, with some other white captives their bunch had, to the Cheyennes as slaves. This old woman was heartbroken. She wanted the boy to keep. She wuz gonna make a 'Pache brave outa him. She says she met the Cheyennes couple years later an' learnt they had traded the captive slaves to the

Sioux fer hosses. But this is her kid, I'll swear onto a stack of Bibles."

The old squaw was nodding her gray head. "Crow steal, betcha."

"I seem to recall something in the reports," said Reynal, "about that raid. The name Brainard is familiar."

Brainard! The bewildered prisoner turned the name over and over in his mind, probing, his heart hammering against his bronzed chest. He heard the lowered voice of Anne, behind him, half audible, saying, "John Brainard," and he turned sharply. A golden world had opened to him.

"Well now," the general cleared his throat huskily, smiled. "This is a little difficult. What would you suggest, Padre John?"

The priest said: "It is all very wonderful, and, I believe, true enough. I should say this long lost child be named John, after his father, as Old Jim says. The Crows are notorious thieves, as we all know. The boy was, no doubt, stolen from the Sioux and raised in their tribe."

Stone Thrower looked from the priest to the old soldier. The reserve of the Crow still clung to him. It would be hard to shake it off, to yield to the impulses he now felt with the knowledge that he was a white man.

"Do you like the name of John, my boy?" asked the General.

"I like the name of 'white man,'" replied the new John Brainard in a clear voice. "I have many times felt the pull toward white men. Among the white trappers in the mountains, I always felt something inside of me clawing to get out, like a wild animal in a trap."

"Good!" cheered the general. "Then you will be known as John Brainard. For a young man you have had a very adventurous life. I think we can dismiss the charge." He came around the table and shook the ex-Crow's sinewy hand.

Anne Morrison, her brother Dick beside her, stepped up bravely. "John Brainard," she said, and her voice was drowned in her own choked sobs and the chorus of cheers that rocked the long room. Even the soldiers yelled and old Jeff Agnew pushed through the throng to slap the back of the new-born white man. "Johnny," he cried laughingly, "I knew yuh wuz a white man fust time I seen yuh mount yore hoss. Comin' to Californy with us?"

John Brainard grinned, confused, bewildered by the events of the past hour. A white man! He glanced toward Anne. She lowered her eyes, and Dick stuck out his hand. "Shake, pale-face," the youngster said feelingly.

The pale-face shook his hand. No longer was he the Stone Thrower, Crow buck. But was it possible that Anne, now that he was just another white man, had lost interest in him? She had turned away, was walking toward the door along with others who were drifting out to spread the news around the wilderness trading post. Padre John walked beside her talking in a low tone. Gradually Peter with Dick, Old Jeff and Broughton followed, believing themselves the last in the room.

The door had barely closed behind them when, from the gloom of a wall shadow, Burley Colfaxe stepped forth. His face, half covered by his coarse black beard, was red with rage, and his heart was filled with the bitter gall of his own poisonous mind. He strode toward the table where General Reynal sat, engrossed in a military report. He said, "General," and the soldier glanced up, half startled. "These people have cooked up a fine big lie for you."

"What's that!" demanded General Reynal quickly, irritably.

"They lied," said Colfaxe bitterly. "This whole story about that murderin' Injun is a lie to get him off scot free. I know, 'cause I wuz with 'em. I was there the night that redskin snuck away an' murdered them Petersons. I seen the hosses he stole."

"You did?" The soldier was dumbfounded, his temper flaring. To be sold a cock-and-bull story to save an Indian. He started up to shout for his orderly outside and Colfaxe put a finger to his lips.

"Don't! Wait, General. They'll kill me if they know I told yuh, let me get away from here first. That Injun is a hellion." So engrossed was Colfaxe in his elaborate lie, that he did not hear the soundless opening of the door. His burning eyes bored into the soldier's face. Reynal stared, fuming. The figure that crept toward them moved like a stalking panther. Reynal's face held Colfaxe fast. Was the soldier weakening, believing?

"My medicine," came the voice of John

Brainard, "told me you did not leave this room, Colfaxe. So I went back to the Indian and listened. I heard you lie—about my friends. What have you got to say to my face?"

COLFAXE swallowed dryly, his black eyes bulging. "You dirty sneakin' varmint!" he snarled, leaping for a saber that hung on the wall. "I'll fix yuh so's no white woman 'll spit on yore grave."

John sprang like a charging wolf. His lightning hand knocked Colfaxe's fingers loose from the half-snatched handle. John Brainard had never learned to fight with his fists like the men of his real blood, but he fought with the ferocity of the savage. His first lunge missed, but his second threw Colfaxe to the rough slab floor with a thud.

With arms and legs like hooks of steel Brainard fastened himself around Colfaxe, locked tightly, the pressure of his mighty arms, forcing the breath from the struggling emigrant's lungs. Above them, curious as to how it would come out, General Reynal stood fingering his beard. The fellow had been lying all the time. He'd felt it. And the young bucko was a holy terror for strength. . . . He'd let them fight it out.

As the breath was choked out of him, Colfaxe softened, his body became limp. Young Brainard, face pressed snug in the shoulder of his foe, braced his knees, lifted Colfaxe some inches from the floor, flung him down hard so that his head struck the board dully.

"Liar," he panted, rising unharmed. "I heard him, General. He is not fit to bait badger traps." John Brainard wiped his hands on his breech clout. "I did steal horses. But from the Cheyennes—for my friends. Their own horses. He has a worm gall in his heart."

"And you, my boy," smiled the soldier, "have a lovely golden haired girl in yours. I know. I watched your eyes and hers. You have been an Indian long enough. Go out there to her, you'll find her with Padre John. She'll listen readily to you, if I'm any judge of women."

John Brainard smiled happily, noting Colfaxe's stirring. A soldier rapped on the door, entered at once. He was covered with dust. Saluted stiffly. "Corporal Buck reporting, Sir," he said. The general grunted something, nodded. "We just got back, Sir," said the corporal proudly. "Run down those white outlaws. Had to shoot three of them, but we got the other three here under guard now. One of them we searched had this in his pocket." He handed something to the officer. John looked. It was a big, silver-cased watch. A turnip, he had heard white men call it. General Reynal had sprung open the case and was frowning.

Burley Colfaxe groaned, rolled over, started to rise slowly, painfully. John watched him, watched the others. The corporal fixed an eye on the rising black beard. "This man, Sir," he cried to the general. "Is he a prisoner?"

"Yes, by Heaven, he is," snapped Reynal. "Take him in charge, Corporal. Did you see the name in this watch?"

"Yes sir," answered the corporal. "Olaf Peterson, it says an' a date. The fellow we got it off confessed. Says he killed Peterson, but claims he was drunk."

"Good work, Corporal. Take that lying cur away from my sight and put him where he'll keep, while I decide what the army can do to him." And to John Brainard, whose heart was suddenly glad as he listened, the old soldier said: "Just in time, my boy. Now there is no question. Take my advice. Go and find that girl, before she starts for California. Tell her in your own white man's tongue what you've been thinking in Crow."

"Thank you, Sir," said young John Brainard, quick to follow the form of the corporal in his address of the old frontier fighter. "I will take heart."

And through the door he went, out into the bright rays of the afternoon sun, to find Anne Morrison. She would not go to California without him.

Wells-Fargo Messenger

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

For fifteen months the Gold Ghost had borne bullion safely over outlaw-haunted trails. But there came a night when the buzzard-breed readied a flaming gun-gantlet for Wells-Fargo!

DUSK was fighting its orchid mantle over the land as he came cantering with splendid ease down the long main street of Rainbow. The Gold Ghost! A strange name for a man surely, yet one that had been earned honestly, perilously, over a period of fifteen months by that youngest of the gold runners—Buzz Christy. Carrying gold bullion from the Rainbow smelter to the nearest Wells-Fargo office at San Antonio. More than six hundred thousand dollars safely delivered without a penny lost. Eighty-five miles or more along night-gloomed trails tracked with hard citizens, laying for the gold runners. Some record!

During that fifteen months, three other gold runners had paid with their lives for their daring. Another was in a Santa Fe hospital with a broken back. Ninety thousand dollars had been the toll to trail wolves, most of it to the Buzzard, a human devil who ironically left a buzzard quill in each of his jobs.

Buzz Christy's continued success must have rankled in the cruel heart of that renegade who was as cute as he was ruthless. So, aping the law, he offered a thousand dollars for Buzz' person, dead or alive, posted notice to that effect on the sheriff's bulletin board, in Rainbow. And now, they were laying odds in the saloons that Buzz had made his last trip through with the gold.

Anxious eyes, curious eyes, lustful eyes, were on Buzz now as he eased through the dusk, sitting his horse as if part of it, flinging a patter of intimate nothings at the pack animal that trotted at his flank. Both horses were exactly alike—blue, lineback roans, slender-hipped, deep-chested animals of a type bred exclusively by Buzz' brother Kent, on his Boxed C outfit in the Capitans.

If Buzz was aware of the stares, he gave no hint of it as he swung down, trailed the rein and wheeled his big roweled spurs into the Gold Bug Bar. Just turned twenty, slender, graceful, with something of panther wiriness in his small, straight body.

As was his custom, he ordered a sack of smokin,' drank a bottle of lemon sour as he acknowledged the greetings of acquaintances. Dan Doney, Gold Bug proprietor, signaled the aproned drink server to waive the charge, edged to the Gold Ghost's side.

"Well, Buzz . . . ," he drawled, ". . . tonight we're pardners, me an' you."

"Yeah?" grinned the kid. "How-come, Dan?"

The saloonman chuckled, toyed with a nugget watch charm. "I've just laid one thousand dollars against two that you'll make the riffle again."

Buzz laid down his bottle. "Who with?" he asked eagerly. "I'd like some of that myownself."

"With Jake Sheedy, Kid. But I covered his roll. But you go through an' a fourth of it's yores."

"Uh-huh!"

Buzz hardly heard Doney's generous offer. His cold gray eyes were fixed on Mileaway Jake Sheedy who toyed smilingly with a solitaire at a rear table.

Gambler, gun-notcher, his handle was acknowledgment of an uncanny ability to prove mile-away alibis when the finger of suspicion pointed in his direction. A silent, dangerous man, he was shunned by those solicitous of their health. Buzz' glance locked with Sheedy's, and between the two men danced a mutual and deadly distaste.

"Two tuh one, eh?" mused Buzz,

Something tugged at his shoulder, then stung like a bee sting. Buzz fired again and again, and was past them. But the blue roan faltered.

narrow-eyed. "Fer a tinhorn that plays 'em close to his belly, he's damn shore. Ain't he?"

"Plenty," agreed the saloonman. "An' I'm jest as shore you'll outfox 'em. How you do it, Buzz, is way beyond me. You're shore got somethin' the others lack. . . ."

"Hawsses!" said the youngster, and pride showed in his fine young eyes. "I fork the finest hawssflesh that ever wore leather. That's the truth, Dan, an' the answer."

"An' the Buzzard must ride good horses, Kid," argued Doney. "The best he can steal." And he chuckled grimly.

"That's it," Buzz nodded. "He can't match my time till he steals Boxed C lineback roans. An' when he tries that, he'll likely die. They raise tough buckaroos in the Capitans, an' Kent Christy ain't no shrinkin' Easter lily hisself." Buzz yawned, looked at his stem-winder. "Huh? Seven thirty-three? Whee-ew, I gotta be foggin' it outa here."

He grinned at Dan Doney, turned to leave. Jake Sheedy's call arrested him.

"Jest a minute, Kid!"

TALL, dark, straight, Mileaway strode forward, and curious townsfolk opened a lane for him. His hat, perched atop a well-shaped head at a cavalier tilt, shaded a bold face with reckless eyes and cynical mouth. That face alone branded the man as one capable of very high or very low ventures.

"Jest a word before yuh go, Buzz. Signs point to a tough ride fer you tonight an' I'm bettin' strong yuh don't make it. Nothin' personal, yuh savvy, but jest a matter uh chance. I'd admire tuh buy you a real drink, figgerin' lemon sour pore ballast at best an' pore backin' fer slant ridin' an' gun-fannin'. Bartender, set us out a bottle uh yore best fightin' likker."

Buzz laughed, but there was no mirth in his eyes.

"That's nice uh yuh, Mileaway. But I don't use the stuff, workin' or loafin'. It's bad for the nerves."

The barkeeper slid out glasses and bottle. Jake poured, passed Buzz a brimming glass.

"Bad on the nerves, eh?" he chuckled. "Funny, it never seemed tuh affect mine. Here's mud in yore eye, Buzz, an' hopin' the one of us that ain't right don't git hurt." He raised his glass, but when Buzz made no move of that sort, his greenish eyes narrowed. "You drinkin' with me . . .?"

Buzz finished rolling a smoke, stabbed the cigaret in his mouth, thumbnailed a light and fanned out the match before he spoke.

"Not now, or never, Mileaway," he said wearily. "You must be gettin' deaf. If I craved whiskey, I wouldn't drink with yuh. I don't like yuh, never did an' never will. I think I kin peg yore play. An' if yuh've got the chips tuh spare an' feel lucky, shove 'em right in!"

Mileaway smiled thinly though his eyes had shrunk to slits. "Luck's my middle name, Kid, an' I've got more chips than caution. I've looked at my hand an' I'm playin' 'er pat!"

"Le's see yore openers, Mileaway," said the youngster softly, and he tightened perceptibly.

"Shore . . .!" gritted the killer, shied his whiskey at Buzz' eyes and stabbed for his gun irons.

A LOOK of surprised horror flooded Dan Doney's face as he stepped out of direct line with the rest. His cry of warning stuck in his throat as he pegged this crude gunplay as one sure way of winning a bet and ridding the trails of the Gold Ghost. To him it seemed no more than brutal murder. But he figured without Buzz' fighting temper.

The kid ducked the whiskey stream, matched Mileaway's swift move. They seemed dead even on the reach and pull. Sheedy's right hand being an eye-winker ahead of his left. Good point shooting targets the true focus of the eyes and Buzz' eyes were on Mileaway's right hand. he fired from the holster top, his slug taking Mileaway's fingers off, smashing his gun against the bar front and doubling him up in a sudden paroxysm of pain.

Loosing his left-hand gun, the killer gripped his maimed hand, howling with anguish. Snarling, pain-whelped curses dribbled across his lips. His teeth grated. His nostrils twitched. Pain and anger shook him from head to foot. "You've shot my hand all tuh hell!" he wailed.

"You asked for it, Mileaway," said Buzz calmly.

"I'll kill yuh fer this!" he yelped.

But the crowd was laughing at him now, laughing that an unruffled kid had met the forced challenge of a notcher an' beaten him. And Buzz was laughing . . . mirthlessly.

"I shot off yore hand, feller," he said meaningly, "when I could jest as well have killed yuh. Cross my trail again with an unholstered gun an' yore friends'll be totin' flowers tuh slow music. Any damage, Dan?"

"Cripes, no!" sighed the relieved saloonman. "An' I'm damn' thankful he didn't rub yuh with his thin play tuh win my thousand dollars."

"Yuh lie, Dan!" snarled the miserable Mileaway. "An' I'll make yuh pay fer sayin' that. . . ."

"I always pay my debts, Sheedy," said Doney, icily. "Just let me know when."

Buzz pouched his warm Colt's. "Thought I'd uncocked that feller," he mused. "Mebby not. But his bottle's shore corked fer tonight. G'night, gents. I gotta be slopin'."

He darted outside, leaped ahorse and headed for the lights of the Smelter office. A hundred pairs of eyes watched them load his pack, saw them clasp his hand as they wished him luck. And then the night swallowed him. The Gold Ghost!

WITH his pack horse loping alongside, Buzz swept away from Rainbow's lights, hit the hogback trail and dipped into gloomy Carrizo Gulch. Where heavy brush hems the trail to a mere cow track, he reined in abruptly, whistled softly. An answer came from nearby and a shape materialized in the blackness.

"That you, Johnny?" Buzz called.

"Gotcha, Buzz!"

Buzz stepped down and the shadow rose to his saddle, spurred down canyon. Buzz slid like a wraith into the brush, waited there until the inevitable pursuit roared past. Then he darted into the bottom willows, found another of those famous lineback roans tethered there.

Once again in the saddle, he spurred up a side gulch, struck an animal run and climbed to the ridgeback. A full moon hung low in the east, big and round and red, like some great pulsing heart of creation. Below it were red-edged, globular clouds, like drops of blood from the coppery disc.

"Blood on the moon," mused Buzz softly to the night, and for a moment his lips were grim. Then he smiled, repeated his low whistle. Brush crackled down the hillside. And magically, that dog-like pack horse was beside him. "We're late, Blue," he reproved the beast playfully. "C'mon!"

They dipped into the gloom of Cattle Canyon and at the bottom struck the Pemberton Mine road. Buzz put his animals into a long hand lope, their hoofs sounding eerily loud in the night silence. Around jutting canyon points. Riding straight in the stirrups, reins high, one hand close to his Colt's butt. Not expecting trouble, but ready for anything. Through gloomy pockets where the eyes were useless. Into patches of moonlight, filtered in lace-like tracery through the oaks. Monotonous *clickety-click* of hoofs. Mile after mile.

The canyon widened. Another half mile would bring him out into the moonbathed malpais, with a hundred trails to choose from and small chance for ambush. Another half mile, but it lay beneath the arcing shade of black walnuts. And therein lay the rub. "Cover all trails!" the Buzzard had ordered, and all trails were covered.

Now a horse whinnied ahead. Buzz reined in, tense as a rattler. His hand slid to his gun. There were thousands of innocent horses to neigh on these hills, but something warned him that this one belonged to a trail wolf. And, reflected Buzz, smiling wryly, a whinny of a horse had upset many a well-calculated and moonlit scheme of skull-duggery.

The Gold Ghost stroked the muzzle of his pack horse.

"Blue," he breathed affectionately, "we're in fer it. Take to the brush, boy, an' foller along. Walk soft an' don't let 'em skylight yuh. Savvy, Blue boy?"

The trim roan nodded its head as if it had actually followed the words. It was suddenly tense, excited. Buzz laughed softly, slapped its rump and the beast slid noiselessly into the brush.

Buzz faced down trail, his young heart pulsing with adventure. He chuckled softly, as if it were a game instead of grim business with death the price of failure to run this blockade. He touched his trembling mount with the spur, rode confidently ahead. His worries were gone. Blue would care for the treasure. Buzz was concerned now only with matching wits and speed and guns with as cruel a hellion as ever rode dim trails: The Buzzard.

It occurred to Buzz in that moment that men are but pawns in the gaming of Fate. Even now Fate rattled the dice to determine which trail the Gold Ghost should follow—the twisting, gun-smoked trail of peril, hunted like a coyote, bayed by the scourgings of hell; or the straight road that led into the Great Mystery—a road so many better men had taken before him. It was in the hands of Fate. And Fate spoke now in challenging tones. . . .

"Haul in, Ghost-man! Come to a dead stop an' sky yore hands!"

That hoarse tone sent Buzz' fighting rage galloping up the scale. He tightened the rein and as his mount slowed, it appeared that he was obeying the injunction.

Buzz knew that his life hung by a slender thread, moving gently along the keen edge of death. But his brain was icy calm, his nerves and muscles screamingly ready for anything.

Now two forms detached themselves from the gloom and sly moonbeams ran gleamingly along the barrels of leveled six-guns.

Gun-talk and tongue-talk—both coming Buzz' way a-plenty tonight.

"Git 'em up, feller!" came a muted threat. "Or we'll drill a hole in yore carcass you kin hide your gold in!"

Tight lipped, Buzz held silent. Now they were dark blobs before him. Explosively, he jerked his gun, jammed home the steel and roared at them. Crimson flame spurts leaped at him and the air was suddenly jarring with gun concussion. Buzz fired swiftly, rocking his gun hammer. Blood on the moon!

Like the figment of a nightmare, Buzz plunged atop one of those blockading shadows, heard his thin scream as he went down under hoof. Something tugged at his shoulder, then stung like a bee sting, but Buzz paid it no heed, firing again and again. In a filtered moonray, he saw the second renegade reel aside, collapse into a shapeless mass, mouth drooping fearfully, eyes horror drenched as death took him.

Now Buzz was past them, his roan buckling down the trail in terror. In a stream of lead hurled from hillside coverts. The Gold Ghost yipped in triumph. Nothing could catch this mount of his. But wait. . . . The blue faltered, caught itself and roared on at unabated speed. But to the horse-wise youngster, that misstep meant a bullet under the beast's sleek hide. How long could it last? That was the question. And the sobering answer seemed written in a gradually faltering stride.

From behind came the cursing of the baffled renegades, the swift thunder of pursuit. Relentlessly, Buzz crowded his stricken animal, failing perceptibly now. A quarter of a mile and it was reeling, struggling. Buzz whistled. The pack pony swept out of the brush at a lope. And at that moment his saddler fell, plowing the dirt with its face, dead before it lit.

BUZZ landed clear, halted the pack horse with a word, darted to it, thinking to mount the beast. But the idea was rejected at once. Loaded with seventy-five pounds of gold, the animal would fall easy prey to the oncoming renegades with the added weight of a man aboard. Pulling the cinch straps, he jerked pack and saddle, let it fall in the trail. He slapped the pack horse away. . . .

"Git, Blue Boy! The ranch, savvy? Bust yore hams gettin' tuh Kent an' fetchin 'him back here. Looks like I kin use some he'p."

The brute muzzled his hand, then broke away in the silent lope that twenty times had cheated the henchmen of the Buzzard. And the Gold Ghost turned to cache the sixteen slender bars nestled snugly in their four leathern packing cases.

Already he could hear them coming. The trail wolves. Like scourging demons from the fiery pits of hell. But he didn't let the sound stampede him. His brain functioned like some fine machine and he worked calmly, swiftly. And when they roared down upon him some moments later, he was standing beside the body of the horse that had carried him over many miles of danger trail, grinning at them in the moonlight.

They swung down, moved warily toward him with leveled guns. Promptly he obeyed their order to elevate.

"Howdy, gents," he taunted them. "I bin expecting yuh. At last you've stopped the Gold Ghost by killin' the finest little hawss in New Mex."

"Well . . ." One of the group lifted heavy eyebrows. ". . . ain't that there too bad? We kilt his hawss, fellers."

"Funny," grunted another sarcastically. "We stopped him, says he. Slim, see what's in them bullion boxes."

Slim kneeled beside the leather cases, rummaged through them. His face fell.

"Not a damn thing . . . that's what."

"Build up a fire!" rapped the leader. "He's tossed the stuff inter the brush. Give a look!"

A fire was started in the trail. Two men guarded Buzz while the rest searched every foot within the circle of light. They found nothing. The blunt, bow-legged leader faced Buzz, his face mantled with the surge of unbridled passion.

"Where is it?"

"Find it!" laughed the kid. "An' the longer yuh look, the safer it's gettin'."

"Yuh lie!" snarled the renegade, and knocked Buzz flat with a brutal face punch. "Yuh've cached that stuff hereabouts, damn close. Tell where, or we'll burn it outa yuh."

Buzz got up, wiping blood from split lips with the back of his hand.

"Go tuh hell!" he muttered stiffly.

"Tie 'im up!" rasped the leader. "We'll take this Gold Ghost to the Roost an' let the Buzzard work on 'im. What that baby don't savvy about torture, the Jicarillas ain't never heard about. Slim, you an' Tonk stay here till daylight an' look fer that stuff, thorough. C'mon, boys. . . ."

AT sun-up the following morning a rider heading toward Rainbow found Buzz' dead horse in the trail, found the empty gold cases and, a little farther along the trail, the stiff bodies of two bearded men. Reconstructing what had happened, he hightailed it to town and told it scary. The news occasioned excitement but hardly surprise. As one old-timer put it . . .

"Buzz was a nice kid but plumb iggerant uh fear an' caution. I knowed he couldn't go on cheatin' the coroner indefinite. Now the mines'll go back tuh haulin' ore, which same they'd orta stuck with in the fust place."

Sheriff Claw Seiber swore in a posse and lit out for the scene of the robbery. He had arrived, dragged the dead horse off the road and was examining the packing cases when a cavalcade of grim-faced buckaroos roared in from the Capitans. They were all mounted on blue lineback roans and a saddleless member of the same breed led them.

The leader of the ranch cavalcade was Kent Christy, a warped-diminutive with red hair, gaunt freckled face and a thin smile on his wide lips. In his lead gray eyes was stubborn denial of what his men expected to find here.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he muttered, swinging down. "Buzz . . . the kid . . . he . . .?"

"H'are yuh, Christy? Can't say about Buzz 'cause we ain't cut his sign. But I'm damn leerie they've did away with 'im. Else he'd showed. Still, he might uh rid his pack hawss to safety. . . ."

"Pore guess, Seiber." Kent spiked that one. "The kid wouldn't never run. An' his pack come a-foamin' to the ranch an' kicked us outa bed fer tuh foller him. I'm guessin' Buzz is a prisoner. . . ."

"Yo're crazy!" snapped the lawman. "Who'd take him prisoner, an' fer why?"

"The Buzzard. Tuh sweat the truth outa him."

"About what?"

"About where he's cached his gold shipment."

"Yuh fool . . ." The sheriff pointed to the empty cases ". . . it's plain as the speckles on yore nose they got his gold."

"Not tuh me, Sheriff," Kent Christy argued. "He crossed that Buzzard an' they've took 'im to the Roost tuh grind the truth outa his carcass. That's where I take chips."

"Buzzard, eh?" Sheriff Seiber stroked his chin. "That sounds like a long shot tuh me. But . . . it's yore funeral. I figger they shot Buzz some'ers close. An' if we knowed where, we could find the body."

"That don't hold water," said Kent stubbornly. "I'm leadin' my boys inter the Buzzard's Roost tuh clean it out an' drink the blood uh ary man that's harmed the kid. I'd admire tuh have all the he'p there is. Kin I depend on you?"

"Me? . . ." The lawman looked startled. "Why . . . I don't know where at that Buzzard roosts. An' besides, I'd hate most mortal tuh lead my posse inter a death trap."

"Disband 'em!" snapped the horse rancher. "Let them as believes in the right go with us. Let the rest go home."

"Where at does the Buzzard hole up, Christy?" queried Dan Doney, first man to volunteer when he heard that Buzz had been stopped. "Who savvies how to get there?"

Kent pointed out a graven-faced, Injun buckaroo who lolled in the saddle.

"Ramon's a Jicarilla, gents. He knows the spot. It's Victorio's old hole-up in the Oscuras. Ramon an' me—we'll go in an' you'll foller. . . ."

"Wait a mo'!" barked the sheriff. "Yore idee's loco. Likely as not the Buzzard never seen this job. What if they was a buzzard leather stuck on that hawss?

Anybody kin do that. You don't know fer shore that Buzz ain't in Rainbow right now. Or in San Antone. No, siree, I ain't leadin' no posse into Oscura County tuh get kilt off. It's outa my jurisdiction."

"Humph!" Kent Christy laughed

"Humph!" Kent Christy laughed acridly. "Mighty partic'lar about county lines all of a sudden, Sheriff. The Buzzard ain't so finicky. You orta be glad tuh he'p clean out that hell nest in the Oscuras. . . ."

The lawman purpled with rage as he glared at the coolly maddening rancher. On his part, twin spots of angry blood stood in Kent's cheeks as he shoved back his hat. . . .

"Ne' mind answerin' that question, Sheriff. I savvy the lay. The Buzzard put yuh in office to administer the law as he tells yuh, not per statute. Call me a liar."

His hand trembled above his Colt's as he awaited the evil little word that didn't come. Claw Seiber gulped and found tongue, branding the charge as political dirt an' them as flung it with having more guts than proof.

". . . Go ahead, Kent Christy," he ranted irately. "Map up all the renegades in New Mex an' see if I care. I warsh my hands uh the hull affair. Git an order from the county-seat an' I'll go the limit. Show me the Buzzard or ary other hombre bustin' the law in Jicarilla County an' I'll wear my hoofs to the hocks a-trailin' 'im. But as this deal lies, I'm backin' trail. Who's goin' with me?"

He strode angrily to his horse, stepped into the saddle. As he ran his eyes over them, he knew they believed Kent's accusation anent his being "owned" by the Buzzard, knew that he alone would return to Rainbow. Anger shook him.

"Hold on, Claw," protested Dan Doney. "Don't fly off the handle. A crime has bin committed in yore jurisdiction. We think one uh our boys has been took acrost the county line. Ain't you justified in trailin' the responsible party, considerin' the law of Oscura County is a hundred miles west?"

"Nary a foot acrost the line," raged the sheriff. He wheeled his horse, sunk the spurs and rode off without looking back. They gazed soberly after him, halfway wondering if he wasn't justified in his stand. Their wonder would have been allayed had they known that Seiber was to stop a half mile up the trail and torch a smoke signal that would be read in the Oscuras.

Kent Christy ran appraising eyes over the Rainbow posse. A toungh crew of kid gun-slingers with two-three oldsters to anchor their spirit.

"I'd admire tuh use any or all uh you boys," said the Boxed C boss simply, "but with yore eyes wide open. It'll be a dangerous chore an' I can't pay a hull lot. . . ."

"The Gold Bug'll pay the freight," hollered Dan Doney, "an' double the ante if we save Buzz Christy. If we beef the Buzzard, the rewards'll pay yuh all handsome. Me—I gotta thousand-dollar stake in this game an' I'm ridin' right with Kent. Who's ridin' with us?"

To a man they volunteered to help mop up the Roost. Crisply, Kent outlined his plan and they found it good. Thus twenty-one men watched the Boxed C boss and his Jicarilla buckaroo, Ramon, ride west across the malpais. And settled themselves to await the veil of night.

YELLOW twilight sank like a pall over Buzzard's Roost. Not a leaf moved, not a breath of air stirred. Even bird voices were muted. Nature seemed to hold her breath, as if nervously expectant of some hellish visitation.

For Buzz Christy, hell had already struck. For hours he had been thumb-suspended to a cottonwood arm, his feet wide-spread by ropes so that he could barely touch toes to the ground and then only with the sheerest agony. Staring into the taunting, vindictive face of Mile-away Jake Sheedy—the Buzzard. Cursing and reviling him. Goading him with repeated reminders of the broken right hand that the renegade leader carried in a sling at his middle. Daring him to do his worst. Defying him.

Mad with the venom of his hate, the Buzzard lingered to glean the last measure of joy from the sufferings of the one who had outfoxed him for fifteen months.

"The Gold Ghost what couldn't be ketched," he sneered. "Well, feller, the Buzzard ketched yuh an' he's layin' the

ghost . . . permanent. You've got guts all right, but when yore arms an' laigs git like red-hot brands, yuh'll crack. Yuh'll give up head an' pray fer death tuh strike yuh. An' yuh'll tell where at yuh cached that gold. Then I'll gut-shoot yuh, cut yuh down an' leave yuh die . . . slow."

"I ain't afraid tuh die, Sheedy!" snarled the kid. "But hell'll shore freeze ice before I bust down an' spill my guts. Yuh've never touched the gold I've carried an' yuh never will. An' yuh better do what killin' yo're goin' to before Kent an' his Boxed C waddies hit this hole an' take it apart."

"Boxed C!" The renegade laughed sneeringly. "That's next on my list. Christy hawssflesh is the best in New Mex an' I want it. If yore brother's in the crowd that'll try tuh bust in here tonight, the Boxed C will need a new papa, same bein' Mileaway Jake. Ready tuh talk?"

"Not in a hundred years!"

"Not yet, eh?" Mileaway shrugged. "You will. Butch . . ." he turned to a burly guard ". . . . let 'im sweat. When he gives up head, come an' git me. I'll be in the big cabin. An', no matter what happens below, don't leave 'im. Savvy?"

"Gotcha, boss."

The Buzzard strode away and Buzz bit his tongue to keep from giving way to hysterical blasphemy. If only Kent would come in time! But how the hell could he find the place, let alone run its gun-guarded approach? Because he had been blindfolded, Buzz only sensed the difficulty of forcing the trail that wound dizzily along dangerous ledges and above yawning abysses. And, Sheedy having confessed knowledge of an attempt to storm the place, the approaches would be double-guarded. It looked hopeless to the pain-twisted gold runner and he groaned.

Daylight died as night swept in on swift wings. Buzz, eyes fastened miserably against the cliff across the gulch, detected a movement. He batted his eyes, wondering if his brain was playing him false. No . . . there it was again, something inching down that sheer face in defiance of gravity. Something big . . . like a man. Now it had vanished below the brush tops and Buzz' pain was forgotten in a sudden surge of hope.

His eyes ran to the cliff top. Limned against the pale afterglow was the form of a man. Then it, too, was gone and another shadow was sliding down the cliff face. Now Buzz knew. A rope. Two men at least were entering the Roost. Could they be Boxed C men? He wanted to scream out in his excitement, but clamped down on his lip, trembling as with an ague.

Now the second shadow was down and Buzz commenced to lose hope. A twig snapped under foot out there somewhere and Buzz held his breath. Butch whirled, peered into the gloom, his rifle at ready. A gliding apparition materialized out of the brush and the guard's rifle swept up. Starlight played upon a silver dart that clove the air like a lightning bolt, a dart that buried itself to a staghorn hilt in Butch's throat.

WITH a low croak, Butch dropped his gun, clawed at the knife that tapped his life forces. But lacked the strength. Like a drunken man, he reeled, stumbled and pitched down. The knife thrower darted to his side, jerked the dripping blade. Another form sped past him, leaping toward Buzz.

"Hang an' rattle, kid!" came Kent's hushed voice. "Boxed C is ridin' the Buzzard with long spurs. Steady now. . . ."

He cut Buzz down, caught the torture-weakened kid as he fell. And went to work chafing blood back into his numbed limbs. Buzz went limp for a brief moment, but snapped out of it as Kent rolled a quirly and jammed it into his mouth.

"Feel better, Kid?"

"A heap," conceded the gold runner. "You come like a answer tuh prayer, Kent. An' shore saved me from bein' collected. Who come in with yuh?"

"Ramon. He led me in the way Victorio escaped when the soldiers c'ralled him here, years ago. See kin yuh use them arms an' laigs now. You'll need same right soon."

"Ramon, eh? Where'd he go?"

Kent chuckled. "Said he was cold. 'Lowed he'd slip down an' build 'im up a fire. There . . . that looks like it now."

From the main center of the renegade hole-up came a dull and rising glow. And the breeze carried the sullen mutter of surprised and angered men. The glow grew into leaping pillars of sky-reaching flame as tinder-dry cabins were torched—one after another. Now the yells of fire-fighting renegades were drowned out as horsemen roared in from their gun-vigil at the entrance, certain that the Roost had been attacked. Ravening in like gut-empty wolves to a kill. And behind them, having awaited the signal of fire, raced twenty-one invaders, led by Dan Doney, six-foot-six and all gristle.

Up the gorge to the very foot of the falls; up a narrow, treacherous, zigzag trail that scarred the black cliff face, along a twisting, knife-edged hogback and down a dusty, shale slide that blotted all trail sign. That was the way the Gold Bug boss led the posse into Buzzard's Roost, on the heels of the faunching gun guards. And they were full in the glare of the burning cabins before the renegades discovered them.

One of the Buzzard's men twisted in the saddle, raised a shrill yell and snapped a shot at the invaders. Hard on the heels of his gun blast, Dan Doney let him have it. A shuddering shriek beat the air and a convulsed form jerked in writhing silhouette above the fire-limned brush line. In a twinkling the Roost was a smoking, crashing, lead-riven hell, lit by the leaping flames of the burning cabins.

The renegades quit their saddles for the greater security of the brush, fanned out with mouthing guns. Bullets rang their death tunes. Horses snorted and curvetted. Men cursed and swore. A law rider reeled in the saddle, then thudded soddenly to the ground. Another screamed, folded over the saddle with blood spurting from his mouth.

Something stung Dan Doney's arm and his exploring fingers found the limb laid open to the bone, the sleeve soggy with warm and sticky blood.

"Fan out!" he bellowed at his followers. "Ride low an' don't bunch! Boxed C, take the left side. The rest foller me thisaway. Beat the brush! Shoot tuh kill!"

"Yip-yip-yipe-e-e-ee, Boxed C!" came the answer as the buckaroos understood and broke away.

Bullets tore at them as they fanned out to crush the renegades' stubborn resistance. No quarter asked; none given. At some screamed order, the renegades broke cover, legging it toward the big cabin, as yet unfired. Like unleased cyclones, the vengeance riders poured down upon them with spitting guns, felling some, scattering the rest like quail. An unstoppable human storm roaring through the hole like a swirling hornet plague. Raking the coverts with lead, pouring salvos of muzzle flame from atop hard-to-target saddles. Some of the Buzzard's cohorts bunched and tried to surrender. Before their hands were up, half were dead, the others in mad flight into the friendly darkness.

AT the very start of the firing, Kent got Buzz to his feet, stabbed Butch's rifle in his hands. The kid was shaky but grinning. Kent seemed satisfied.

"C'mon!" he ordered, and raced toward the fun.

Buzz limped after him, the cocked rifle in his swollen hands. At the edge of the clearing where the cabins sat, he squatted, his eyes confused by the kaleidoscopic Devil's rodeo going on out there. Kent had vanished but the kid saw Ramon bellying through the grass toward the big cabin from which crimson spurts were flashing. Injun-like, the Jicarilla was fetching to fire that fort on its blind side to drive out the inmates. And that meant the Buzzard. What a chance!

With an eager curse, Buzz rose, commenced to wolf slowly through the brush. If he knew Mileaway Jake Sheedy, that worthy would run for it when the going got too tough. And that meant the rear of the big cabin. Being lame, Buzz traveled slowly. By the time he reached the point where he could command the rear of the Buzzard's shack, Ramon had fired the place. And the first smoke got results. Into the shadows behind the big cabin darted two men.

Buzz flung up the rifle but jerked it down as a slender figure flashed in to bar the escape of the renegade leader. Buzz knew that sawed-off, wiry form. Kent Christy.

"Kent!" screamed the Gold Ghost and an icy chill struck at his heart.

Short gun leveled, lips calling a stop order that was muted in the din, Kent raced to head off the Buzzard. It seemed to Buzz that the three men fired at the same moment. Kent went down like a gunned beef. One of the renegades stopped, sagged at the knees, then stumbled into the light as he fell. That man was Sheriff Claw Seiber and Buzz was cursing his name as he sped toward his fallen brother. And as he leaped into the light, Mileaway Jake Sheedy espied him.

The Buzzard paused at sight of the one he supposed trussed up the gulch, flung about and fired. The bullet creased Buzz' forehead, staggering him. For just a minute he struggled to stand, feeling the numbing scratch. Then the fires of his fighting rage lit like a holocaust, swept away his weakness With a howl, he gripped his rifle, darted into the brush on the heels of the most heartless killer the Oscuras had known since Victorio.

Following the tell-tale crashings in the renegade's wake, Buzz stumbled and fell as a slug screamed over him. The kid lay where he had fallen, struggling to still his breathing, certain the beat of his heart was audible a dozen yards away. Nerves taut as fiddle strings, he inched his rifle front and waited.

Sounds of the renegade wipe-out in the Roost were waning as the Buzzard's cohorts caved or died. And for that Buzz was thankful when he heard a low mutter up ahead. . . .

"Musta drilled 'im that time. Wonder how he got loose?"

Brush crackled. Buzz crouched, tensed on his haunches. He dared not move and betray his position, yet if he didn't, Sheedy would step right on him. Now the man loomed above him. Buzz leaped, sprang aside as he jerked the trigger. The Buzzard cursed gaspingly, bore in and down with crimson ribbons streaming from his guns.

A searing pain lanced Buzz' thigh, seemed to paralyze his left side. And the sodden weight of the renegade atop him was curiously and ominously still. Something warm and sticky and deadly poured in a nauseating, pungent stream across his face.

BUZZ' brain was foggy. He had no recollection of rolling off that grisly burden, of reeling into the light of the burning cabins. But such he must have done. The first thing he knew, he was lying on the ground while Dan Doney dressed his wound. Buzz turned his head, stared into the eyes of another, similarly hurt, who lay beside him.

"Kent!" he gasped weakly, and stuck out a weary hand. "I was scairt that lousy tinbadge notched yuh."

"Too tough fer tuh kill, Kid," grinned the Boxed C boss, gripping his brother's palm. "But Claw Seiber wasn't so lucky. Mine gripes like hell. How's yore's?"

"Likewise, Kent. But it's shore worth it. . . ."

"This country owes you boys a debt," broke in Dan Doney, rising from his completed task. "One it can never pay. But fer two things, the night'd be perfect. I reckon the Buzzard has cached Buzz' gold away so good we'll never find it. An', worse luck, it looks like he's got away tuh enjoy it. All we've collected is some thick-headed hoss thieves an' such. Too bad we couldn't uh found out who that varmint was at least."

"Yeah," grinned Buzz. "Too bad. Jake Sheedy an' Claw Seiber was both the Buzzard. An' plumb insultin' to a decent bird fer stealin' his name. Neither of 'em got away. Kent kilt the sheriff an' I handed Jake his ticket. Yonder in the high brush after he blowed this hole in me. Nope, them two was never no parts uh buzzards . . . not even maggots. . . ."

"What yuh mean, Kid?" said Kent.

"A buzzard or a maggot would uh found my shipment they looked so hard fer. An' we best head yonderly before the sun gets up good or the buzzards an' maggots'll uncover same."

"Howcome, Buzz?" Hope had flared in Dan Doney's eyes.

Buzz laughed softly. "Like this, Dan. Roany done the best he could after they shot him. When he dropped, I dumped the lead off'n Blue an' sent him fer he'p. Then I rammed them bullion bars down Roany's throat. They're in his belly now, I hope. Let's go git it."

Which they did.

SANTA FE OR BUST!

By BENNETT FOSTER

Penniless Major Kitridge, ex-Virginia Cavalry blade, made a reckless wager with Despair. He pledged his life against a trifle in Mex gold that he'd bring Miranda's hunted caravan safe into Santa Fe.

A Great Novel of the Overland Trail

GALEN KITRIDGE, lately Major, the Virginia Cavalry, C.S.A., fingered the last gold piece in his pocket and looked at his wife. All about the tavern in whose common room they sat Independence bustled and thrived, but not for Major Kitridge. He turned that last gold piece over and over, while his eyes searched his wife's face and his voice spoke the thing that was in his mind.

"It's no use, Zoe. There isn't anything." For an instant he paused and then smiled ruefully. "You see," Kitridge continued, "I know only one trade—fighting! Before the War I studied law, that's true, but I never practiced it. There's no need for a lawyer here; and fighting men . . ." Major Kitridge's hand made a little gesture, expressing the fact that in Independence, fighting men were a dime a dozen.

Zoe Kitridge—she who had been Zoe Fernald—smiled that small, secret smile that women reserve for their husbands when those husbands come like small boys, for

The chief was looking squarely at Kitridge, and the major stayed his finger on the trigger.

comfort. "You've an office, Galen," she said. "And surely someone will come to you. Surely there is need for another lawyer in this town."

Kitridge shook his head. "Bert Loy is working as a wheelright," he said. "Dad Summers has turned down half a dozen jobs. He's a known guide and plainsman and he can have his choice. But for me . . . nothing." He laughed, having spoken the words. "And I was once their commanding officer," he concluded.

The smile left Zoe Kitridge's face. She had never heard that bitterness in her husband's voice before. It worried her. Then, with a buoyancy that she did not feel, she spoke again. "There's no need to worry, Galen. I'm sure that there's no need to worry. And there are always my jewels. If you need them. . . ."

"I've not come to that!" Kitridge snapped. "Not yet. No, what I believe, Zoe, is that we had better go back to Virginia. Back to where I'm known. I'd have a chance there."

Zoe Kitridge shook her head. She was not a beautiful woman, the major's wife. Her face held too much character for beauty. But wide, strong brows, deep brown eyes, full red lips promised a man love and understanding and a timeless faith. "We'll not go back, Galen," she said. "We'll never go back. We came West because we wanted freedom. We wanted a new wide country and our own lives to live. We couldn't find them in Virginia. Our trouble is that we haven't come far enough."

"And we can go no farther," Kitridge added abruptly. "It's no use, Zoe." He got up, moving away from the woman. There was strength in Kitridge's stride, an unconscious use of power, repressed and held back, and as always when she saw her husband move, Zoe Kitridge felt that power.

"You mustn't worry," she said, rising to follow him. "You mustn't, Galen. Something will turn up."

"Mr. Micawber!" Galen Kitridge chided, and smiled fondly. "You're a confirmed optimist. Well, I'll certainly find nothing by staying here. I'll go back to the office."

Bending, he kissed his wife and then as gallantly as some Old World courtier he

bowed and picking up his hat left the crowded little room. Zoe Kitridge watched him go, and others in that place followed him with their eyes. There was something about Major Galen Kitridge: there was indeed!

When Kitridge had departed, Zoe went to their room. Entering their small quarters, she stood there thinking; then crossing to the window she closed the rude shutters and her privacy assured sat down on the bed. From her bodice she produced a small chamois skin sack and emptied the contents on the counterpane beside her.

There were three rings in the little loot the woman spread out on the counterpane: three diamonds. There was a stomacher, big, heavy, of gold with seed pearls about a great emerald. And there were earrings —two pairs of them—one made of pearls and the other of diamonds. Zoe Kitridge lifted the jewels, looking at them, remembering their history, their sparkling brightness conjuring into her mind visions of great stately halls, of music, of swirling skirts, of gold-bedecked uniforms, of the South before the War. Then, sighing, she gathered her treasures back into her hands once more and replacing them in the chamois sack, returned the bag to its hiding place, picked up her bonnet and, donning it, went out.

Outside the tavern, Independence boiled and bubbled with life. Gathering her skirts in her hand, Zoe Kitridge made her way along the street, passing by frontiersmen in buckskin, teamsters burly in their blue jeans, townsmen fashionably dressed, workmen, laborers and, more than any of these, the emigrants. You could tell these last from all the rest. There was a look about them, a hungry, questing glint in their eyes, a tightness of their bodies that spoke their identity. They were going on, going on out into the vast sweep of level plains, out to where the hills marched in serried ranks, sweeping down to the valleys. Zoe Kitridge paused beside a blacksmith shop and, holding her skirts a trifle higher, turned toward the door. She had not reached the threshold before Bert Loy, stolid, square-shouldered, tobacco bulging his cheek, appeared and stood, his hammer resting comfortably against his thigh.

"Mrs. Kitridge, ma'am?" Loy said.

Zoe Kitridge smiled. She knew Bert Loy; had known him all her life. Loy had followed Galen Kitridge through the War, had been with Kitridge before and after Appomattox, had followed the major through that last fierce fight in which Zoe Kitridge had been set free and won. She could trust Bert Loy with her life.

"Where is Dad, Bert?" Zoe asked.

"He's around," Loy answered. "Was you wantin' him, ma'am?"

"I want you both," Zoe answered. "Can you come to the tavern?"

Loy nodded. The tobacco had flooded his mouth and he could not speak, nor would he spit in the presence of his officer's wife.

Zoe, seeing Loy's difficulty, turned her head. She heard his quick relief and then his drawling voice: "Ma'am, I'll get Dad. We'll come right away."

"Thank you, Bert," Zoe said, smiling. "I wouldn't ask except that the major needs you."

"Is the majah in trouble?' Loy's voice was filled with quick anxiety.

"In trouble, yes, but not the kind you think," Zoe smiled.

The anxiety left Loy's eyes. "I'll get Dad right away," he promised. "You go back to the tavern, Miss Zoe, an' I'll bring him."

"Thank you, Bert," Zoe Kitridge said again and, gathering her skirts once more, smiled at Loy and walked away. Bert Loy, reaching back, put down his hammer and busied his hands with the tie string of his leather apron. He would get Dad Summers at once. The major needed them.

GALEN KITRIDGE, having left his wife, walked slowly along Independence's street, not heeding those that passed him. He was moody and distraught, feeling himself at a loose end, useless and

If you enjoy reading about the Army and fighting men you'll like the true-to-life story of young Matt Kilby, who gave up a blazing ring career to throw his punches for Uncle Sam. Don't miss A SOCK FOR UNCLE SAM, by Bill Cook, in the current issue of FIGHT STORIES. On sale at all newsstands!

cast aside. At the building that housed his office he paused briefly and then, entering, hung his hat upon a peg and walked back to the little rented space that held his desk. There were four businesses in this little room: his own, a commission merchant's, a real estate office, and a liquor salesman. As he reached his desk, the commission man arose from his chair and approached Kitridge.

"There are two men here asking for you," the commission man stated. "Came in looking for a lawyer. I told them you'd be right back."

Galen Kitridge said, "Thank you, White," and turned toward the two men who had followed the commission man. "I understand that you were looking for me, gentlemen."

"We're lookin' for a lawyer," the first of the two strangers announced. He was tall, burly, with dark beard and mustache above which his eyes, small and blue, surveyed Kitridge. His companion—shorter, smooth-shaven save for a wisp of mustache, dark skinned, brown eyed—showed flashing teeth in a friendly smile.

"You are a lawyer?" the dark man echoed.

Galen Kitridge bowed gravely. "I am," he agreed. "Won't you sit down, gentlemen?"

The two men seated themselves beside his desk. Kitridge took his own chair and, glancing from one to the other of his callers, voiced a question. "What can I do for you?"

"If you're a lawyer you can draw us a contract," the burly man announced. "I got no use for contracts but Señor Miranda here wants one."

Galen turned to the dark-skinned man. "My father says that I must have a contract," Miranda stated. "And I have learned that to obey my father is wise. Do you speak Spanish, *Señor?*"

"No, I'm sorry." Kitridge smiled at his questioner. "My education has been neglected, I suppose. I speak French, but not Spanish."

Miranda returned the smile. "No matter," he replied. "I think better in Spanish, but the English will do. Will you draw a contract for me, *Señor?*"

"Certainly. If you'll tell me what you want. . . ."

Miranda bent forward. "My father," he said, "is Pasqual Miranda of Santa Fé. You have heard of him perhaps?"

Galen Kitridge shook his head. "I'm familiar enough with the name of Santa Fé," he answered. "I'm sorry that I have not heard of your father.'

"No matter." Miranda waved that aside. "My father is a merchant. We have been in the East, buying goods. Now I wish to make a contract with Señor McMurty here to transport these goods I buy, to Santa Fé to my father's store."

Kitridge glanced at McMurty. The big man was smiling beneath his beard. Seemingly he encompassed Kitridge in that smile as though he would say: "You and I will humor this child."

"I'll be glad to draw the contract," Kitridge stated. "If you'll tell me the terms?" He drew a sheet of foolscap from the drawer of his desk, picked up a pen and, dipping it in the ink well, looked inquiringly at Miranda.

"I'll tell you." Miranda leaned forward. "I have . . ." He began an enumeration of the goods that he had bought, while Galen Kitridge wrote it down. When the list was finished, Miranda consulted with McMurty, ascertaining the approximate time it would take to make the journey to Santa Fé. That date and the approximate price decided upon, he turned and smiled flashingly at Galen Kitridge. "Now, *Sénor,*" Miranda said, "you draw up the contract. El Señor McMurty and I will sign it, and when my father arrives he will be pleased."

McMurty hoisted his big bulk out of the chair. "We'll come back," he said. "When'll you have the contract ready?"

"In an hour." Galen Kitridge looked up. Somehow he did not like the sullen, condescending attitude that McMurty displayed.

"We'll come back then," McMurty agreed. "Come on, Miranda."

"In an hour, *Señor.*" Miranda smiled at Galen Kitridge and followed McMurty from the desk.

WHEN they were gone Kitridge took a fresh sheet of foolscap and opened a calfskin-covered volume on his desk top, a lawbook containing standard contract forms. He copied busily, listing the goods

that were to be given McMurty for transportation, and the terms of the agreement. As he wrote, White, the commission man, came strolling over.

"That was young Miranda, wasn't it?" White asked.

Kitridge nodded, not looking up.

"I've sold his father some stuff," White said. "Good people, the Mirandas. I don't like their company, though."

Now Galen Kitridge looked up from his copying. "What's that?' he asked.

"I said that I didn't like McMurty," White answered. "He's been freighting West out of Independence for a year or two now. Seems to have a lot of tough luck."

Kitridge leaned back in his chair. "How do you mean 'tough luck'?" he drawled.

White shrugged. "He brings his wagons through all right," White explained, "but he's lost a shipment of goods within the last six months. Seems that the Utes jumped him over around Raton Pass and took what was in the wagons. How the wagons weren't burned, I don't know."

"You think that McMurty . . .?" Kitridge left his question unfinished.

Again White shrugged and, interrupting: "I don't think about McMurty. He's got a lot of friends here, dangerous friends. I just say that if I wanted a wagon master to haul goods to Santa Fé, I'd think twice before I hired him. I'll not bother you more." The commission man turned his back and walked toward the door. Frowning, Galen Kitridge resumed his copying after a moment.

McMurty and Miranda came back within the hour, as they had promised. They read the contract and Miranda affixed his signature with a flourish. McMurty scrawled his own signature and then, each folding the copy that Kitridge had made for him, placed the paper in his pocket.

"And now, *Señor,* your fee?" Miranda asked.

Galen Kitridge named it, and Miranda, producing money from his wallet, paid. *"Gracias, Señor,"* he said, and started toward the door. Then, turning, he came back. "Have you ever thought of visiting Santa Fé?" he asked. "We have few lawyers in Santa Fé. The field is not crowded and it is a wonderful place."

Galen Kitridge smiled at the younger man's exuberance. "I'd like very much to go to Santa Fé," he said, "but . . ."

"Then go!" Miranda urged. *"Hasta la vista, Señor.* I shall see you there." He turned then and hurried to where McMurty waited impatiently at the door.

When the two were gone, Galen Kitridge closed his desk and, rising, took his hat and went out. He had done his first bit of legal business in Independence!

When he reached the tavern he found Bert Loy and Dad Summers as well as his wife, waiting for him. There was about the three a guilty look as though they were immersed in some conspiracy. Kitridge advanced toward them, smiling. He felt good. For the first time since he had come to Independence he had earned money, not a great deal, but money none the less.

"What are you three up to?" he demanded, stopping in front of Zoe. "You look as though you'd been caught in the jam jar. Out with it!"

For an instant there was no answer to his question, then Bert Loy cleared his throat. "Majah, suh. We . . ." Loy stopped and glanced at his companions.

Kitridge looked from one to the other now, a fine edge of anxiety entering his mind. What had happened here?

"Majah," Old Dad Summers growled, "we ain't satisfied here. You ain't neither. Loy didn't come West to work fillin' wheels with spokes, an' I didn't come to hang around Independence. I . . ." Summers, too, stopped short.

"What are you trying to tell me?" Galen Kitridge demanded.

Zoe Kitridge answered the question. She lifted her head and, full and fair, her brown eyes met her husband's. "We're trying to tell you that we're going on, Galen," she said slowly. "We're trying to tell you that we're moving . . . West."

ZOE KITRIDGE led the way back to their room. Galen came after her, and behind the major, Dad Summers and Bert Loy followed. It was their familiar position. For four long years those two stalwarts had followed Galen Kitridge. In the room Zoe seated herself on the bed. Bert and Dad entered and stood beside the wall, and Kitridge, leaning against the door, surveyed the three.

"We're going on . . . West?" he said.

"That's right, Majah," Summers agreed. The major held his eyes on Zoe.

"We are, Galen," the young woman asserted. "I knew today at noon that we had to go. I called Dad and Bert. I've sold my jewels—some of them." She flushed faintly, seeing the anger in her husband's eyes. "We have the money for an outfit. You said yourself that there was nothing here for you."

"You sold your jewels?" Kitridge's voice was harsh. "After I told you . . ."

"I'd do more than that!" Zoe arose from the bed and crossed the room to her husband, placing her hand on his arm and looking up into his face. "I'm your wife. You can't deny me. You can't change me, Galen."

Kitridge's stern face softened and Loy breathed a sigh of relief. Then the major's eyes were hard again. "But what can I do farther west?" he demanded. "There's no room for another lawyer here and if we go on, what can I do?"

Dad Summers' drawl stopped Kitridge's words. "You won't trifle yo' time with no law where we'll go. Yo're a fightin man, Majah. You ain't no lawyer. Fightin' men's whut's needed west of yere, an' yo'll qualify."

Kitridge made a small helpless gesture. "You're all against me," he said. "I've failed here. I . . ."

"Major Kitridge!' A call came from the hallway. Galen Kitridge turned to the door and faced the proprietor of the tavern who stood in the hall.

"Yes?" Kitridge questioned.

"There's a man here to see you."

Kitridge stepped into the hallway. The proprietor indicated a small dark-skinned man with snowy hair and mustache.

"*Señor* Kitridge?" the white-haired man said, moving forward.

"I am Galen Kitridge."

The elderly man stopped. "I," he announced, "am Pasqual Miranda. You drew a contract for my son today?"

"I did." Galen looked at the smaller man, his eyes puzzled. "Isn't it satisfactory?"

"I am afraid too satisfactory." Pasqual Miranda shrugged. "I have a lawyer here that my son should have consulted. He has examined the contract and says that it cannot be broken." Pasqual Miranda, noting the occupants of the room, stopped abruptly.

"My wife," Galen said, following the man's gaze, "and some friends."

"I am sorry to interrupt your visit." Don Pasqual made a stiff little bow. "I am worried. I thought perhaps that, having drawn the contract, you would be able to break it."

Galen Kitridge shook his head regretfully. "I did not draw it to be broken, Mr. Miranda," he announced.

"I feared that." Minranda spoke perfect English with only the faintest trace of accent. "Then I must pay McMurty off." He half turned as though to walk away.

"You don't want McMurty to haul your goods?" Galen asked.

MIRANDA turned back. "I do not, *Señor,*" he answered. "I do not trust the man. I have no assurance of ever receiving the goods that I have bought." He paused as though expecting Galen Kitridge to speak.

"I am sorry, *Señor* Miranda," Galen said. "If I had known, I would not have drawn the contract."

Miranda bowed again. "And I, too, *Señor,*" he agreed. "I am sorry. My thanks to you. May I pay you for your counsel?"

Galen flushed. There had been the faintest trace of contempt in Miranda's voice as he asked the question. "There is no fee," the major said curtly. "Good day, sir!" He wheeled, turning from Miranda to enter the room again. Miranda started slowly along the hall. Inside the room Dad Summers took up the argument. Dad had had time to think.

"Yo' ain't failed, Majah," Dad drawled. "Folks here just don't know a good man when they see one. Mostly they's damnyankees anyhow. An' like I said, yo' ain't cut out for a lawyer. Yo're a fightin' man. Yo' . . ."

Dad Summers stopped. Galen Kitridge had lifted his head sharply and his eyes were bright. "Wait here!" he commanded briefly, and stepped out into the hall. Don Pasqual had almost reached the end of the corridor.

"*Señor!*" Kitridge called, and, as the white-haired man stopped and turned: "*Señor* Miranda!"

Don Pasqual came slowly back along the hall. Kitridge went to meet him. Zoe, Dad Summers and Bert Loy were congregated at the door of the room and they witnessed the meeting.

"You are going to cancel your contract with McMurty?" Kitridge asked abruptly as Don Pasqual stopped in front of him.

"That is true." The New Mexican nodded his head. *"Es verdad."*

"That will cost you eight thousand dollars!" Galen Kitridge's voice was very strong and sure. He knew the price called for in the contract.

"And that, too, is true." Miranda shook his head ruefully. "But what can I do, *Señor?* I have a hundred thousand dollars' worth of supplies and goods to be freighted. I cannot afford to lose them."

"And you will pay another eight thousand dollars to some other freighter to haul your goods?" Galen asked.

Miranda nodded. "There is no help for it, *Señor.*"

"For four thousand dollars I will insure the delivery of your goods in Santa Fé." Galen Kitridge's voice was very quiet there in the hall.

Miranda's black eyes were wide with astonishment. "If the goods are not delivered, you will pay me one hundred thousand dollars?" he said incredulously. "You will insure my goods?"

"I will insure your goods," Kitridge answered slowly. "But I do not have one hundred thousand dollars, *Señor* Miranda."

"Then how . . . ?"

"With my life," Kitridge said quietly. "That is the insurance I have to offer."

For a long minute Pasqual Miranda stared at the tall man who stood before him. Galen Kitridge's eyes were gray and steady. Along the lean line of his jaw his scar, mark of an old saber wound, made his face stern. Suddenly the New Mexican smiled.

"In my country, *Señor,*" he said, and his voice was as level as Kitridge's own, "we are sportsmen, sometimes gamblers. I will leave the contract with McMurty. And when my goods are in my warehouse at Santa Fé I will pay you four thousand dollars. *Vaya con diós, Señor.*"

For one last moment the two men looked into each other's eyes, both of them smiling. Then, with a little gesture, Don Pasqual turned abruptly away and made his way steadily down the hall. Galen Kitridge watched him go and, when Miranda disappeared down the corridor, turned and came walking back to the crowded room.

"You were right, Zoe," he said. "We go West."

WITH all the efficiency of a veteran cavalry command Galen Kitridge and his companions set about their preparations for the journey. At first, Kitridge's idea was that Zoe should travel by stage to Santa Fé, taking one of the coaches that left Independence thrice weekly for the New Mexico capital. But Zoe quietly scotched the plan. She was going with her husband, and argument and pleading could not alter her choice.

To Bert Loy, knowledgeable in such matters, went the duty of purchasing the wagon. Kitridge himself bought the horses and mules and selected the arms, choosing weapons of the same caliber so that ammunition for one would fit all. Dad Summers, wise in the way of plains and hills, advised with both Loy and Kitridge, and himself bought the supplies for the trip.

In the midst of these preparations an interruption came. Returning to the tavern late one afternoon, Kitridge found Father Paul, the hard-working priest of the Church of Independence, in consultation with Zoe. With Father Paul was a dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman who curtsied prettily and lowered her eyes when she was introduced as Señorita Dolorita Montes. Father Paul immediately drew Galen aside and told him the purpose of his mission.

"I am charged with the safety of this girl," the priest confided. "Her mother has died in Santa Fé and her father has sent for her. The good sisters of the convent in Saint Louis have brought her to me and I must send her on. I wish you and your wife to take her."

Kitridge shook his head. "I can't do that, Father," he replied. "I don't know what I'll run into on this trip. You know that I'm insuring Miranda's goods. I can't be responsible for a girl's safety."

"Your wife is going with you," the priest said.

"And I wanted her to go by stage," Galen answered. "No, Father . . ."

Father Paul placed his hand on Galen's arm. "Here," he interrupted, "is a young girl, Mr. Kitridge. She has been sheltered and shielded all her life. You know the men who travel by stage. Good men, but rough. And there are no women. Dolorita will be safe with you, and your wife will look after her. Won't you take her?"

Galen wavered in his determination. After all, the trail to Santa Fé was well traveled and, so Galen Kitridge believed, safe enough if a man took ordinary precautions. He was not greatly alarmed or concerned by the bargain he had made, deeming Don Pasqual's worries over the safety of his goods ill-founded.

"And you know," Father Paul pressed his point, "that the stage is sometimes stopped by Indians, while the wagon trains are more apt to go through."

That was true. The marauders of the plains, the Utes, the Apaches, the Comanches raiding far to the west of their own country, sometimes attacked the stages, but the well-armed wagon trains were generally unmolested, save that now and then stock was stolen from them.

"And your wife wants to take the girl," the priest insisted.

"I'll talk with Zoe and then decide," Galen returned. "If Zoe wants her , . ."

"She will be a companion for your wife on the trip." Father Paul played a last, triumphant card.

"If Mrs. Kitridge wants her . . ." Galen said again.

Zoe, leaving the girl, came to the two men. "You're going to take her, aren't you, Galen?" she questioned. "She's so sweet, and she's worried about her father. Won't you take her, Galen?"

Galen Kitridge smiled fondly at his wife. "If you want her, my dear," he answered, "we'll take her."

And so Dolorita Montes, black hair shining, eyes demurely downcast in the presence of the men, was added to the party.

McMURTY was loading his wagons as rapidly as possible and so haste was necessary on Galen Kitridge's part. He would leave Independence when McMurty's wagons left, intending to go with them all the way through to Santa Fé. Sometimes, in his movements about the town, he encountered McMurty. The big wagon master was jocular when these meetings occurred. Kitridge's bargain with Pasqual Miranda was common konwledge throughout the town and McMurty chose to make a joke of it.

"So you're goin' along to keep me honest, Kitridge?" he jibed when first the two men met. "That'll be fine. I'll look after you all the way to Santa Fé. You ought to split yore commission with me."

Kitridge smiled and answered that he would be glad of the protection of the wagons and their men. He did not trust McMurty, believing that the wagon master was not nearly so well pleased as he appeared to be. Still, if McMurty planned any trickery and underestimated his adversary, so much the better.

With young Fernando Miranda, Kitridge was not so fortunate. Don Pasqual had left for the New Mexico capital the day following his bargain with Kitridge, but young Fernando remained in Independence to go on West with the wagons. It was apparent that he considered Kitridge's preparations and plans an insult to his own capabilities and he did not hesitate to show his dislike for the major.

McMurty's wagons were loaded. Galen Kitridge's preparations were complete and the time of departure set for early morning of the next day, when an open breach with Fernando Miranda occurred.

They were in the tavern bar—Kitridge, White, the commission merchant, Dad Summers and Bert Loy, all grouped together—when Miranda and McMurty came in. Miranda's face was flushed and it was evident that he had been drinking. Pushing through the men in the room, he elbowed his way to the bar, and there, close beside Galen, faced around.

"So," Miranda growled, "you think I am a child, do you? You think that I must be watched?"

Kitridge made no answer. The way to avoid a quarrel is to remain silent. It took two to make a quarrel and Galen Kitridge was determined not to be one of those.

"It is an insult to my friend, *Señor* McMurty," Miranda snapped. "You doubt his honesty."

McMurty, standing behind Fernando

Miranda, said nothing and made no movement. Dad Summers, at Galen's elbow, growled deep in his throat. "He wants a fight, Majah."

"You are cheating my father!" Miranda snapped. "You are a cheat and a coward, *Señor!*"

Galen Kitridge's face flushed dull red. Those were words that he would not take from any man and still he could not call out this boy and demand satisfaction.

"You've been drinking, Miranda," Galen said quietly. "When you are sober I'll expect your apology."

"A coward!" Miranda snarled. "Apologize to you? Ho!" He laughed insultingly.

Kitridge looked past the drunken youngster into Webb McMurty's eyes. "You'd better take him along, McMurty," he said. "You're responsible."

"Oh, no, I ain't!" McMurty answered quickly. "He's just sayin' what a lot of folks think!"

Kitridge's gray eyes narrowed. "What do you think?" he asked, danger tinging his voice.

"I got no fight with you," McMurty said hastily. "If you can make a piece of money out of ol' Miranda, I'm for you."

"Talk to me, *Señor!*" Miranda snapped. "I say that you are a coward and that you have cheated my father. Will you fight?" One long thin hand reached out and struck Kitridge's cheek.

No man could overlook that. The color drained from Kitridge's face. He looked steadily at Fernando Miranda. "You take advantage of your condition and your years," he said quietly. "I'll fight, Miranda."

"I will expect your friends to call upon me then," Miranda announced grandly. "At any time, *Señor.*" He half turned, his mission accomplished.

"The time will be now," Kitridge said quietly.

Miranda turned back, chagrin showing on his face. He had not expected to be so promptly accepted.

"You want to kill me, don't you?" Galen Kitridge asked. "You believe that I've cheated your father and you'd like to get me out of the way. Is that right?"

He did not wait for Miranda's answer, but continued imperturbably. "Well and good. I'll give you the chance."

From beneath the skirts of his coat Kitridge lifted a weapon. It was a Colt, .36 caliber, cap and ball revolver, new and glistening in the lamplight that came across the bar. Galen laid the weapon upon the bar top. "There are six loads in that gun," Kitridge announced. "I'll ask Mr. White to draw five of them. You and I will cut the cards for first chance. The man that wins will take the gun and snap it three times at the other. Then it will be the other's turn. Is that agreeable with you?" His steady gray eyes bored into Miranda's.

MIRANDA could not meet that level stare for long. He lowered his gaze. "That is not the way to fight," he said. "Our friends should arrange a meeting and . . ."

"You called me a coward," Kitridge flared. "I'm not so sure of *your* courage. I've made you an offer, Miranda. You want to kill me and here's your chance. Well . . ."

"I'll fight!" Miranda snapped.

"Draw five loads from the gun, White," Kitridge drawled, and turning his back, smiled evenly at Dad Summers.

White picked up the weapon doubtfully. "Kitridge . . ." he began.

"Draw the loads, White." Galen Kitridge's voice was inexorable. "Have you a deck of cards?" He looked at the man behind the bar.

The bartender produced a deck. Violence was no novelty in Independence. The tavern barroom had seen death more than once. Galen made a gesture toward Miranda. "Cut!' he ordered. "The high card wins."

Miranda reached out a not too steady hand and lifted a little pile of cards from the deck. "The ace of spades!" McMurty snapped. "Yo're first, Miranda!"

Galen Kitridge, reaching out, turned a deuce and, smiling at Dad Summers, dropped the card.

"Lookit here, Majah," Dad began. "Lemme take yore place. You got Miss Zoe . . ."

"Dad!"

Dad Summers broke his words in midsentence.

White, coming from a table in the rear

of the room, placed the Navy Colt on the bar top. "I drew five loads," he said hoarsely. "I left the caps on the nipples."

"Perhaps you'll spin the cylinder?" Kitridge looked at the bartender as he spoke.

Silently the barman picked up the weapon and, in plain sight of them all, half cocked the hammer and spun the cylinder under his thumb. Here was no chance of chicanery. All could see. No one knew which of those chambers contained the load. Kitridge gestured toward the Colt, glinting evilly on the bar top.

"*Señor* Miranda," he said.

Miranda picked up the gun. His hand trembled in earnest now and his face was pasty white. Galen Kitridge, knowing how the boy felt, smiled faintly.

"The light is bad, *Señor,*" he drawled. "I would suggest that you stand close. It's your privilege to fire."

The muzzle of the Colt wavered as Miranda presented it to Kitridge's chest. His thumb was unsteady as he drew the hammer to full cock. Kitridge stood facing him, calmly, unmoving. The hammer fell and a cap exploded, crashing in the quiet of the barroom.

"*Por Diós!*" Miranda gasped and jerked the hammer back, using his left hand.

Again a cap exploded. Now the muzzle of the gun was waving in a narrow circle. Miranda brought his left hand up to steady his right, and once more the barroom echoed to the minor explosion of a percussion cap. Very slowly, trying vainly to steady his hands, Fernando Miranda placed the weapon on the bar top.

"To you now, *Señor,*" he said.

Galen Kitridge picked up the Colt with one broad hand. He knew how Miranda felt, knew the dry stickiness of his mouth, how his heart pounded in his chest, how the room swam before him. There was compassion for the boy in Kitridge's mind. He lifted the gun quickly, cocking it as it came up. A cap snapped there in the room's quiet and then, so quickly that the two explosions merged, came the roar of a discharged shot. Beside the door a man ducked and flinched away and, on the wall, a rack of deer horns jerked sharply. The bullet had plowed squarely into the middle of the shield-shaped mount.

"No man may call you a coward, *Señor,*" Galen said quietly, looking fairly at Miranda. "But you are not wise." His eyes went on past the white-faced young New Mexican to meet Webb McMurty's gaze.

"Have you got anything to say, McMurty?" Kitridge challenged.

"Let's get out of here, Fernando," McMurty rasped. "Come on!"

Galen Kitridge returned the Colt to its holster beneath his coat. He looked at Dad Summers and smiled. "You can take a drink, Dad," he drawled. "You and Bert. One drink and then no more. We're leaving early in the morning for Santa Fé."

III

OUT of Independence, Westward bound! Straining mules, snapping whips, shouts of the drivers, wagons creaking as the grease worked down to newly lubricated skeins, wagon master swearing, bringing order out of the turmoil and confusion. Out of Independence, bound West!

Galen Kitridge, on a sturdy bay horse, watched the departure of McMurty's freighting train. Beside him Dad Summers sat his saddle, Sharps rifle across his saddle bows, keen old face turned from the sun, faded blue eyes watching. On the seat of the light wagon Bert Loy held the lines, reaching out over the backs of the four mules. In the wagon, peering over Bert's shoulders, Zoe's excited face showed, cheeks flushed, eyes bright. Close beside Zoe was Dolorita Montes, the sparkle in her eyes belying her name.

"Knows his business," Dad Summers commented. "McMurty ain't got a poor wagon or a bad mule. Watch!"

Galen Kitridge nodded. There on the plain before them were McMurty's wagons, twelve of them, each with a trailer hitched behind. Six mule teams drew each wagon and trailer. McMurty rode along the flank of the train, and the teamsters sitting the nigh wheelers popped their long whips as the mules swung the wagons into the rutted trail. Beyond the wagons a stock tender drove a little bunch of mules, replacements for the teams. On three wagons roustabouts rode, steadying themselves with a grip on the sideboards.

"Eighteen men," Dad Summers drawled, "not countin' young Miranda. Why did

you let him off last night, Majah? He had it comin'."

Kitridge shrugged. "He's young. Besides, I'm doing business with his father, and then . . . well, he wasn't to blame."

"McMurty kind of egged him along?" Summers' keen blue eyes flashed to Kitridge's face.

Kitridge shrugged. "Maybe," he rejoined, noncommittally.

"It was all over town this mawnin'," Summers vouchsafed. "How you called him an' how you let him off. You could stay in Independence an' have all the law business you wanted now, Majah."

Kitridge shrugged again. "We're going West," he said. "I made a bargain with Pasqual Miranda. Besides, you said that I wasn't a lawyer, Dad."

"No more you are!" Summers answered sturdily. "We mought as well pull out, hadn't we?"

"Might as well," Kitridge agreed. "Loy!"

Bert Loy spat expertly over a wheel. "Giddap!" he ordered, shaking the lines over the mules. "You, Jack!' The mules settled into their collars and the wheels rolled. Dad Summers, swinging his horse, came around the wagon to flank the side. The two spare saddle horses, each tied to the hames of a wheel mule, stretched their necks and moved reluctantly. They were on the road!

Before them stretched the prairie, an endless sea of grass bright in the sunlight. Across its surface the wheel ruts ran, cutting the sod, speaking of men that had traveled them, reaching out from civilization to the frontier, binding a continent, tying ocean to ocean.

"Some day, Dad," Galen Kitridge said across the backs of the pulling mules, "this will all be history. Some day there will be a telegraph line along the road, and a railroad that goes clear to the Pacific."

"Some day," Dad Summers answered. "But not now. Watch that rut, Loy! Yo' want to upset the wagon?"

"Yo' ride yo' hawse, Dad, an' lemme drive the wagon," Bert Loy answered testily. "Hit's right purty, ain't it, Majah?"

"Beautiful," breathed Major Galen Kitridge. "A new country!"

From the wagon, Zoe Kitridge spoke. "Our country, Galen."

TEN miles they made that day, and when evening came, looking back toward the east, they could see the faint haze of smoke above the town that they had left behind. West of them, three hundred yards away, the wagons of Webb McMurty were corralled, swung into a square with irregular sides, and beyond the wagons, McMurty's stock grazed under the care of a stock tender. Dad Summers, ranging out from the wagon, collected buffalo chips for a fire.

"Buffalo," Dad Summers said dreamily. "There's money in buffalo, Majah. We mought hunt for hides." He glanced quickly at the tall man he followed and loved.

"I'm not a butcher, Dad," Kitridge answered quietly.

"There's them that are," Summers rejoined. "An' that"—his voice was reflective—"is the trouble. Injuns live offen the buffalo. It's their meat an' clothes an' shelter. There's thousands bein' killed. An' some day the Sioux an' the Cheyenne an' the Utes, an' all of 'em, are goin' to rise up an' try to stop it. An' that's the Gawd's truth, Majah." He paused reflectively. "Don't know as I'll blame 'em any," he concluded.

A man, walking, detached himself from McMurty's wagons and came toward the Kitridge camp. His figure, small at first, grew larger in the twilight until all could see that their approaching visitor was Webb McMurty. The big trail master came on up to the fire, stopped, and spoke.

"Pretty good for the first day, I'd say," he began conversationally. "We come ten miles. This-here creek is Camp Creek. The water's good an' we got good grass for this early in the year. How are you folks makin' it?"

"Very well," Kitridge answered, wondering at the man's friendliness.

"That's good." McMurty gazed around the camp. "Got yore mules hobbled, I see."

"We'll stake 'em tonight," Dad Summers drawled. "I done this before, McMurty."

The wagon master nodded. "Mules will go back home if they get loose," he stated. "Well, I just thought I'd come over an' see how you was makin' it. You could camp with us if you wanted to."

It was a friendly offer and Galen Kit-

ridge hardly knew how to turn it aside. Bert Loy was frankly scowling at the visitor and Dad Summers had withdrawn into himself.

"We're all bound for the same place," McMurty amplified. "Don't seem to me to be much use of makin' two camps."

It was Zoe who took the onus of answering upon herself. "This is our first experience," she said. "We are enjoying it. And camping alone makes us feel like explorers. Thank you just the same, Mr. McMurty."

"I thought mebbe it was what happened last night that made you lay back," McMurty said, eying Kitridge. "I wouldn't blame you none if it did."

"What happened last night, Galen?" Zoe asked quickly.

"Ain't you heard?" McMurty turned to the questioner. "Mr. Kitridge, here, saved young Miranda's life." He laughed heartily. "You sure scared the kid, Kitridge."

"There's no need to talk about it," Kitridge said stiffly. "Thanks for your offer, McMurty, but we'll camp alone."

"Well," McMurty seemed to accept the decision as final, "we can visit back an' forth, anyhow. I don't look for any trouble, Kitridge, but if any comes yo're welcome at my camp."

"Thank you." Kitridge's voice was still stiff.

"An' when we strike the buffalo, I'll see that you get fresh meat," McMurty said. "Good night, all."

Zoe's voice echoed the good night. Dad Summers drawled, "So long, McMurty."

The burly wagon master turned, and lifting his hat in a friendly gesture, walked back the way he had come. When he was gone, Zoe spoke quickly. "What happened last night, Galen?"

"Nothing of much consequence," Kitridge answered. "Hadn't we better stake out the stock, Dad?"

Dad Summers hoisted himself to his feet. "Yes, suh, Majah," he agreed. "You fix the camp, Loy, while me an' the Majah tend the stock."

RETURNING from staking the horses and mules, their ropes fastened to long iron picket-pins driven into the sod, Galen Kitridge found Zoe waiting for him. Dolorita and Zoe were to sleep in the wagon while the men spread their beds close by. As Galen came up, his wife, coming swiftly, out of the darkness, put her arms about him and held him close, her cheek against his chest. "Why must you do such things, Galen?" she whispered, and Galen Kitridge knew that Loy had told her of the meeting in the barroom.

"He was young and foolish and he had been drinking," he answered, holding his wife close.

"And you would take that chance!" Within his arms, Zoe's body strained. "You're all I have, Galen," she said. "All I have."

Galen Kitridge, because he had no words, bent and kissed her.

THE following morning the train went on. The sun was bright and the little prairie birds flitted up before the marching teams. Sometimes a lark, courting in this springtime, shot up from the grass, mounting high and higher, his song drifting down to them, a clear, sweet warble. Sometimes rabbits, the big jacks of the plains—their ears and tails black tipped—bounded up and leaped away. Coyotes, too, brown shadows that slunk along the grass, were common; and once, early in the morning, they saw a *lobo,* that giant buffalo wolf of the prairie.

At night the campfire gleamed, red coals on the prairie. There was drawling talk as Dad Summers, veteran of the plains, spoke of the country that they had traversed, and of the country to come. Always, as they moved, so too McMurty's wagons moved, a crawling caravan, and sometimes when the evening campfires glowed McMurty came back and visited, making himself at home, occasionally bringing some small gift of food from his camp.

There were days when they saw no soul, no sign of life save those crawling wagons ahead, and there were other days when the stages passed them by, straining horses in the traces, drivers and guards on the lurching seat, passengers leaning from the coach windows to wave a greeting. Too, they passed the stage stops, small communities set upon the plain, a corral that contained stock, a sod dwelling and tobacco-chewing men who cared for the horses of the relays.

Sun and shadow, rain and clouds, rivers

that were crossed through splashing fords, these came and went and then one morning when all the world was brilliant with the sun, Dad Summers, riding beside Galen Kitridge, lifted himself in his saddle and peered beneath a shading hand. Settling back once more he pointed, and spoke a magic word:

"Buffalo."

Galen Kitridge, too, shaded his eyes with his hand and stared across the prairie. Far away, like the shadow of a drifting cloud, he saw the herd.

"Fresh meat in camp tonight," Dad Summers prophesied, and glancing at his companion, Kitridge saw the light of the hunter in his eyes.

"I'll show you, Majah. Yo' leave it to me."

All that morning the drifting dark cloud on the prairie grew nearer. When noon came McMurty's wagons, well ahead, pulled into the lop-sided square that spoke of the day's end. Plainly McMurty was after meat. Galen Kitridge, coming on, halted his wagon below the square and here, too, camp was made, beds unloaded and the fire pit dug. Dad Summers was afire with impatience, but Kitridge knew the value of having things in order. So, with camp made and a light snack eaten, the men tightened cinches and prepared to go. Zoe, too, wished to take part in the hunt but forebore mentioning her wish. She knew that someone must stay with the camp and Dolorita . . . and Bert Loy and her husband and Dad Summers were like so many small boys, eager to be off.

"There's ways an' ways," Dad said as, side by side, the men rode off from the wagon. "You can make a stand an' shoot from it, an' that's the way the hunters do. They kill as many as their skinners can take care of, an' stop at that. Then there's the Injun way, an' that's sport. Yo'll want to see that way, Majah?"

"We'll kill only what we can use," Kitridge answered soberly. "You know that, Dad."

Dad Summers shook his head. "Two won't matter out of all of them," Dad Summers answered. "Or," seeing the look of disappointment on Bert Loy's face, "even three. I'll pick a young cow, Majah, fo' camp meat. We'll take the boss ribs an' her tongue an' liver. There's old bulls aroun' the aige of the herd, bulls that have been shoved out an' that ain't no more use. It wouldn't hurt for yo' an' Loy to kill one of them. I'll show yo' how."

THEY were close to the herd now, near to that great drifting mass. Farther along the grazing animals, McMurty and his men were already at work. The distant popping of guns told of a slaughter in progress. Dad Summers frowned. "They'll take more than they can use," he said. "An' that's bad, Majah. Now here!"

Dad Summers pulled his Sharps from its buckskin sheath and, examining the weapon, made sure of hammer and cartridge; then, grinning, he lifted reins and gun. The horse, frightened, leaped one long length and lit running. Straight toward the loosely grazing herd Dad Summers rode, his voice high as he screamed his yell.

Before that charge, the buffalo split and ran. Too late. Consummate horseman that he was, Summers had already singled out his quarry and was making toward it. The young cow he pursued ran cumbersomely, and Summers, coming up alongside, bent in his saddle and—so close that the muzzle blast of the Sharps singed the curly mat of hair on the cow's shoulder—discharged the gun. The cow ran on a few lumbering steps and then stopped, head hung low. For an instant she stood so while Summers circled back, and then, collapsing, the animal fell in her tracks.

Summers came riding back. "That's how, Majah," he called.

The buffalo, having run on a short distance, stopped. Some of the animals looked back curiously and presently fell to grazing once more. Apparently they recognized no danger, and Galen Kitridge, riding up with Loy, stopped beside Dad.

"Isn't there any danger?" he demanded. "You'd think they'd charge."

"An' sometimes they will," Summers retorted. "There's no sport in killin' just one buffalo, Majah. I've been with the Comanches when every buck was huntin' fo' his lodge. You ought to see that! Buffalo runnin' an' the braves whoopin' an' shootin' with their bows an' arrers an' the dust risin' up. This here's just like killin'

a cow. Yo' want to try yo' hand, Loy? Do you, Majah?"

Galen repressed his smile. "Go ahead, Bert," he said.

Now it was Loy's turn. He, too, had a Sharps, and checking load and hammer, lifted his horse into a long run, the thin Rebel yell rising from his lips. Like Summers, he was successful and came back, panting with excitement, pride in his eyes, to where his companions waited.

"Sure yo' don't want one, Majah?" Summers asked. And, when Galen shook his head, "Then here's where we go to work. Come on, Bert."

They butchered the cow first, taking the boss ribs, the tongue, the liver and the hide. It seemed to Kitridge, working with his men, that here was criminal waste and yet he could do nothing about it. Using flat rocks they spread down the hide, flesh side up, close beside the carcass. In the morning, when they moved the wagons, they would pick up the hide and load it.

From the carcass of the cow they went to the bull that Loy had killed. The bull had folded his forelegs under him as he fell and lay there on the plain, a great mountain of black hide.

"We'll take the hide an' let the meat go," Summers said. "His meat wouldn't be no good nohow." Producing his sheath knife he whetted it on a small pocket stone and grinned at Loy. " 'Bout the biggest bull I ever seen," Dad commented.

Loy swelled with pride. Advancing to the animal, Summers made an incision along the back. "Easier this way," he said. "You can prop him with his laigs an' . . ." He stopped and bending down, tugged at something in the bull's dewlap.

"What is it, Dad?" Loy asked, moving around so that he could see. "What . . .?" Loy stopped. Summers had straightened and was holding out the object he had extracted from the carcass. It was an arrow, feathered, stone pointed, slim and slender like some vicious snake.

"Fresh, too," Summers commented. "The shaft ain't broke nor nothin'. Lookit here, Majah."

Kitridge was already at hand. Summers, his blood-grimed finger pointing to marks indistinguishable to the untrained eye, gave his opinion.

"This yere's Cheyenne. Now what would they be doin' so far south an' east of where they range?"

IV

At camp no one mentioned the finding of the arrow. Dad Summers, secreting the missile beneath his buckskin shirt, was blithely cheerful as he set about preparing meat for the evening meal. The rack of ribs and the hump were hung from the wagon because, as Dad said, fresh meat was no good until it hung a while, and the liver, sliced, went into the skillet. It was not until the meal was eaten that Galen Kitridge drew Dad aside.

"What about the arrow, Dad?" Kitridge asked.

Summers shrugged. "Like I said, it's Cheyenne," he answered. "An' it's fresh. Wasn't shot long ago. The Cheyennes are workin' around this herd."

"What kind of Indians are they?" Kitridge asked.

"They're a powerful mean kind of Injun when they want to be," Summers answered thoughtfully. "They're good hawsemen an' they're good fighters, an' if they got an idea this is their country they can make it plenty tough. But they're pretty good sports, too."

"Hadn't we," Kitridge asked, "better tell McMurty about finding the arrow?"

Dad shrugged. "Nobody can tell McMurty much," he growled. "He knows too much already. Yo' can tell him if yo' want."

"I'll tell him then," Kitridge decided.

He left the older man and Dad stared after Kitridge's straight back as the major walked away toward McMurty's camp. After a moment Dad shrugged once more and, calling to Loy, set about staking the mules and horses.

There was a great deal of meat in McMurty's camp. Meat and hides. McMurty himself came forward as Kitridge entered the wagon corral, and greeted his visitor. The wagon master was in a jovial mood.

"Fresh meat," he observed. "Makes the boys feel good. I broke out a keg an' give 'em a dram, too. They've earned it. What's on yore mind, Kitridge? You ain't never visited me before."

Galen Kitridge looked around him. Men were loafing around the fire, young Fer-

nando Miranda with his black eyes fixed on the visitor, an inscrutable expression on his face. That the wagon-man had been drinking, was evident. Flushed faces and loud voices spoke of more than one dram drunk. Turning to McMurty again, Kitridge came abruptly to the object of his visit.

"We killed two buffalo today," he said. "We found an arrow in one. Summers says that it is a new arrow, recently shot, and that it belongs to some Cheyenne. He believes that the Indians are close by. I came to tell you."

McMurty eyed his visitor and then grinned. "Scared?" he questioned. "If you are, yo're welcome to pull up an' camp with my wagons. I already told you that."

Kitridge stiffened. The way in which the invitation was given made it impossible to accept.

"I came to tell you what we'd found," he said coldly.

The sardonic grin still twisted McMurty's beard. "I see," he drawled. "Yo're still lookin' after me. Got Don Pasqual's goods insured an' you don't want nothin' to happen to 'em. All right, Kitridge. I been over this trail before an' I know there ain't no Injuns this far east. I look after my stock an' my wagons an' I ain't got any yellow up my back. You been stiff necked an' too good to camp with us. It looks to me like now that we was gettin' away from town you'd changed yore mind. Well, I've told you that you was welcome to pull up. Come ahead."

Anger flared in Galen Kitridge. "I can protect myself," he snapped, "and I've told you what I came to say. Good night, McMurty!" He wheeled abruptly from the man and started back toward his own camp. McMurty's laugh followed him.

PERHAPS a hundred yards Kitridge walked and then, quietly from the darkness a voice hailed him. "*Señor* Kitridge."

Galen stopped. Young Fernando Miranda came up out of the blackness and paused.

"Yes?" Kitridge said, his body tense with anticipation.

"*Señor,* I have intended coming to your camp," Miranda said slowly. "But I could not. I have an apology to make."

Kitridge's muscles relaxed. He smiled faintly. He knew why Miranda had not come to the camp. The young New Mexican could not bring himself to apologize before Summers and Loy.

"You did not kill me when you could have done so," Miranda continued. "For that I am grateful. I had been drinking and I was wrong to call you a coward and a cheat. Forgive me."

"That's forgotten and done with," Kitridge answered. "And you are a brave man, Miranda."

"Thank you, *Señor.*" A pause, and then: "And I was wrong concerning Webb McMurty. I do not trust him, *Señor.*"

"What have you seen?" Kitridge's voice was sharp.

Through the darkness he could see Miranda's shoulders lift and then sag. "Nothing," Miranda answered. "All seems as it should be. I have seen nothing, but I have a feeling. . . ." The younger man broke off in mid-sentence. Kitridge nodded. He knew that uneasy feeling, that imperceptible trace of insecurity and distrust that came to a man. Dad Summers called it "medicine" and followed its precepts. Bert Loy spoke of it as a "hunch."

"Will you," Kitridge requested, "come to me and tell me if you see anything wrong, *Señor* Miranda?"

"I will," Miranda answered promptly. "And now, *Señor* Kitridge . . . will you shake hands?"

Galen reached out and gripped Miranda's extended hand. "You are a brave man," he said again. "I think we will be friends."

"And I, too, think that." Miranda released Galen's fingers. "Adiós, *Señor.* I wish to return before I am missed."

"Good night," Galen answered. "And good luck, *Señor.*"

Miranda faded back into the night, and Galen Kitridge, turning, went on to where his fire blinked sleepily in the darkness.

When he reached the camp he found Bert Loy sitting well away from the fire, his rifle across his knees.

"Dad's slipped out to look around, Majah," Loy said. "He tol' me to keep the fire goin' till you come in. We'll douse it now."

Loy's boot scraped dirt over the fire and the glow died.

"An' Dad said that we'd keep watch tonight," Loy continued. "Him an' me. Kind of like the Army, Majah: standin' guard."

"I'll take my turn," Kitridge said briefly.

There was a small sound of motion and Dad Summers, rifle across his arm, came from beyond the wagon. "Nothin' to report, Majah," he drawled, low voiced.

Kitridge nodded. He was beginning to see his foolishness, now; beginning to realize the vastness of the country about him, and the swift savagery that might strike from that vastness. "I spoke to McMurty," he said slowly. "He laughed at me, Dad, but he invited us again to camp with his wagons. I think we'd better do it."

Dad Summers shrugged. "We ought to of done that right along," he drawled. "Or else tied up with an immigrant train when we started out."

"Why didn't you tell me so?"

"Because . . ." Summers hesitated and then, taking a breath, went on: "Yo're stiff necked, Majah. An' I'm used to you tellin' me, an' not me tellin' you. An' because this idea of yores was the only way I could see to get you to go. Yo' was happy as a bug about it. Yo' figgered yo' was really doin' something' an' yo' didn't stand to lose nothin'. There was no harm done. I aimed to tell yo' before we hit Injun country, but they kind of slipped up on us."

Sudden anger flared in Galen Kitridge, hot and high, fed by pride. He glared through the darkness at the shadowy shape that was Dad Summers. And then he fought the anger down. All that Summers had said was true. Galen Kitridge glanced at the wagon where Zoe and Dolorita Montes slept. He gulped back the words that were on his lips and, after a moment's silence, replaced them with others.

"You're right, Dad. In the morning I'll swallow my pride and join with McMurty's wagons."

"An' that," Dad Summers commended, "will be actin' sensible, Majah. Loy, you take this first watch. Yo' wake me at twelve o'clock."

Loy, glancing at the star-lit sky, answered curtly, "Hit ain't long till twelve now, Dad."

"And you wake me at four," Kitridge said quietly. "Good night."

IN the morning with gray light breaking over the prairie, both camps were up and stirring. Loy hitched the mules to the wagon and climbed to the seat, and Dad Summers and Kitridge, mounting, they moved ahead to where McMurty was breaking camp. Zoe Kitridge glanced curiously at her husband but asked no questions; and Kitridge's face was stern and he did not look at his wife. There was a new humility in Kitridge but what he purposed was not an easy thing for him to do.

At McMurty's camp the men were busy hitching the teams. McMurty himself, accompanied by Fernando Miranda and two others, came out to meet the Kitridge wagon. Loy halted his teams and Summers and the major dismounted.

"Mornin', Kitridge," McMurty greeted, pausing and confronting them. "What's on yore mind this mornin'?"

"I've come to take advantage of your offer," Galen Kitridge answered. The words were hard to say, seeming to stick in his throat. Pride is a hard thing to overcome and Galen Kitridge had more than his share of it.

McMurty laughed, throwing back his head and the sound rolling from his great bull throat. "Decided to throw in with us, huh?" he said, his laughter done. "Thought that you'd play safe after you found an old Injun arrer! Well, Kitridge, I changed my mind. I don't want yore wagon travelin' with mine. I don't want you spongin' off me!"

For the instant Kitridge was completely taken aback. He glared at McMurty and his hand shot up to the butt of the Navy Colt at his hip. Dad Summers, growling a curse, had swung his cased rifle forward and was sliding off the buckskin sheath, and Loy, on the wagon seat, reached for his weapon.

"An' don't try that!" All the laughter, all the scorn was gone from McMurty's voice and only grim warning remained. "Yo're covered now."

Summers stopped his work with the rifle case. Loy sat motionless. Beside McMurty's nearest wagon four teamsters

stood, rifles in their hands. McMurty laughed again.

"You started out on yore high an' mighty lonesome," he rasped. "Stay that way. Stay out of rifle shot from my wagons. You hear me, Kitridge?"

"McMurty!" Fernando Miranda's voice rose sharp and commanding. "You can't do that! You are under contract to me. If I ask *Señor* Kitridge to join us . . ."

"These are my wagons an' I'm the one that says what happens to 'em," McMurty rasped. "If you want to travel with Kitridge, you can, Miranda. But you can't do that an' travel with me, too."

Galen Kitridge dropped his hand from the butt of his Colt. "Don't make an issue of it, Miranda," he said quietly. "Stay with McMurty. That's your place. We'll do very well by ourselves." He did not glance at McMurty but looked up at Loy.

"Pull along, Bert," he ordered quietly. "Dad . . ."

Dad Summers mounted. Galen Kitridge toed his stirrup and swung up. Mounted he looked down quietly at the wagon master. "You've contracted to take Pasqual Miranda's goods to Santa Fé," he said slowly, "and I've contracted to see that you do it. Good day, McMurty."

Loy, scowling, lifted the lines and the mules moved.

WHEN the wagon had passed McMurty's train, Galen Kitridge swung close and spoke: "I'll drive a while, Loy," he announced. "Take my horse."

Loy stopped his team and the exchange was made. When the wagon moved once more Galen Kitridge spoke to his wife. "Get on the seat beside me, Zoe."

Obediently Zoe Kitridge climbed over the back of the seat and settled down beside her husband. For a time neither of them spoke. Then: "I've been a fool," Galen Kitridge rasped. "A proud, crazy fool. I didn't realize what I was doing."

Zoe's hand closed on his arm. "Why do you say that, Galen?" she demanded.

"I didn't realize what I was bringing you into," Kitridge answered grimly. "I didn't realize how big this country is or what might happen. I thought it was like Virginia. Last night I saw what a fool I'd been and decided to join with McMurty's train. He won't have me. I've brought you into danger, Zoe, and I'll never forgive myself for my foolhardiness."

"But other men bring their wives across the plains," Zoe Kitridge reminded. "You know that, Galen."

"They don't start out alone and unprotected," Kitridge rasped. "They travel in trains or by stage. And this girl, Dolorita? . . . I'm exposing her to danger, too."

"Do you want to turn back, Galen?" Unknowingly, Zoe tightened the clasp on her husband's arm.

"No!" The word came sharply. "We're going on to Santa Fé. But I can see now how foolish I was to speak to Miranda as I did. And the next stage stop we reach you and Dolorita will leave us. You'll take the stage and go on through."

There was no answer. Zoe Kitridge knew the uselessness of arguing with her husband when he spoke in that tone. The major stared out ahead, over the bay backs of his pulling mules.

AT noon that day McMurty passed them. Dad Summers had swung off long before noon, making a circle to the east where still the dark mass of grazing buffalo showed against the grass. He was not there to scout the trail, and Kitridge, driving the mules, stuck the wagon in the crossing of a creek after Bert Loy had marked the ford as safe. Knee deep in sucking sand and water, Kitridge and Loy worked to free the wagon while, below them, at another ford, the McMurty train went by.

With the wagon free and traveling once again, Loy took the lines and Kitridge mounted his bay. McMurty's train was a crawling worm across the grass, and to the east the great herd of buffalo still showed in the distance. Against that dark mass, a moving dot appeared and, knowing this to be Dad Summers returning, Galen Kitridge left the wagon and rode toward the scout. The two met and Summers shook his head.

"I didn't see 'em but they're around," he growled. "I located their travois tracks. It's Cheyennes, all right, an' they're follerin' the buffalo. Huntin'. I don't think they're hostile."

"Why not?" Kitridge asked.

"Because they've likely seen us," Summers answered succinctly, "an' if they was hostile they'd have jumped us before now. What's that over there?"

He pointed south across the flat country. Following his arm Kitridge could see a small black dot on the grass. Above the dot buzzards circled lazily and, even as he looked, one coasted down and lit.

"Something dead," he said. "A buffalo?"

"It mought be," Summers answered. "Let's go to the wagon, Majah."

The two rode now toward the wagon, the black spot on the prairie almost in their path. As they neared it birds flew up, the buzzards running awkwardly to gain momentum for their flight. Summers and Kitridge watched and then, his voice sharp, Kitridge spoke: "That's no buffalo, Dad."

Dad Summers did not answer at once. From among the birds a man had staggered to his feet, his motion the cause of their flight. Both men wheeled their horses and at a run made toward the spot. The staggering figure fell, sprawling, as the riders slid their horses to a stop and threw themselves from their saddles.

"Miranda!" Summers snapped. "Now what . . .?"

Galen Kitridge was bending over the man. Fernando Miranda's head was a bloody sight. His eyes, wide and bright, held unforgettable horror.

"Ride for the wagon, Dad!" Kitridge commanded. "Bring it here." Gently he lifted the slight figure in his arms.

"Saw you . . . stuck . . ." Miranda gasped. "Tried to get . . . McMurty to help you. He . . . shot . . ." The English words halted. For an instant, Spanish, sibilant, weak, followed. Then: *"Socorro . . . los zapalotes. . . ."* The bright eyes closed and the slight body went limp.

"Ride, Dad!" Kitridge shouted. "Hurry!"

V

WHEN the wagon reached them Loy unloaded a bed, and with Zoe, white faced but brave, helping him, Galen Kitridge set about his rough surgery. Fernando Miranda had been shot twice, one ball grazing his head, the other piercing his side just under his shoulder and penetrating through to the back. This was the dangerous wound and Kitridge with sharp knife and antiseptic from Zoe's small chest of remedies, removed the ball and cleansed the wound. Miranda stood the torture bravely, talking throughout the operation, occasionally pausing to press back the pain with tight, white lips.

He had, he said, protested to McMurty when the train passed by Kitridge's wagon stuck in the ford. McMurty had answered roughly and one word led to another until the wagonmaster, in a flare of temper, ordered Fernando to shut up. The boy had lost his own temper then and told McMurty that these were his father's wagons, that they were contracted to Pasqual Miranda and, as Don Pasqual's representative, he, Fernando, ordered McMurty to stop and help Kitridge.

"It was then he told me," Fernando said. "He intends to steal the goods in the wagons. He has some scheme of leaving the trail. I do not know what. He laughed at me and I lifted my rifle, and he shot me."

Kitridge nodded, his face an expressionless mask. This was what he had bargained for with Pasqual Miranda. Don Pasqual had his word and now Kitridge must make it good. How could he, with this wounded boy to care for?

"So they left me," Fernando said. "I did not know it at the time. But when I wakened I saw the buzzards. . . ." His voice broke and rose a tone. There was an insane light in his eyes. *"Los zapalotes!"* he screamed. *"Los zapalotes! Por Diós!"*

"Easy, boy. Easy!" Kitridge said soothingly. "The buzzards are gone. They won't bother you. You are safe. Easy now."

Fernando did not hear the words. His voice rose, higher and higher, screaming words in Spanish. Dolorita, who had hovered anxiously by, dropped to her knees beside him. She, too, spoke Spanish and the words and her hand upon his forehead seemed to quiet Fernando. Gradually the insane screaming checked and the boy lay quiet, only his wildly lighted eyes gazing up at the girl.

"Damn McMurty!" Kitridge rasped. "I'll ride after him and . . ."

"Majah," Dad Summers interposed. "Look here!"

Kitridge turned. Toward the west, where lay the trail, there was a cloud, a lowering, ominous haze. Dad Summers pointed toward it.

"What is it, Dad?" Kitridge asked.

"That's fire," Summers said calmly. "The Injuns have fired the grass. They do it every spring. We got to move, Majah."

It was true. There was fire beneath that lowering haze. They could not see or hear the flames, but the little wind drifted smoke to them. Kitridge wheeled. "Help me get Miranda into the wagon!" he ordered. "Get in, Zoe! Dolorita! Get on the seat, Loy!"

"We can't make the trail, Majah," Summers warned. "Wouldn't do no good if we could. Look. It's south of us, too."

"You pilot us," Kitridge ordered. "There!" He and Summers, lifting together, had raised Miranda and the bed he occupied, to the wagon level, and with Zoe's aid had slid it in.

"Make him as easy as you can, Zoe," Kitridge ordered and, striding toward his horse, mounted. Dad Summers, too, had reached his saddle and now rode ahead of the wagon.

"Follow Dad," Kitridge directed Loy. "Not too fast, Bert. This is a long haul."

Bert Loy spat over the wheel and lifted the lines. "Giddap, mules!" he shouted. "Giddap!"

ALL the remainder of that day they traveled steadily. The line of smoke grew nearer, nearer as the day's end approached. There was no respite, no chance to stop. The fire pressed close and closer. Calmly Galen Kitridge watched that marching line of fire. Once, riding ahead, he joined Dad Summers. That veteran was imperturbable.

"They fire the grass every spring," he said, gesturing toward the billowing smoke. "Think it makes the grass better for the buffalo. Mebbe they're right. I don't know. Anyhow it comes up young an' tender in the burnt places."

"Will we beat it?" Kitridge asked calmly.

"Mebbe." Dad's drawl was not reassuring. "I'm headin' for them little hills, Majah. There ought to be a creek along the base of 'em some place. If we cross a creek an' leave the fire on the other side, we're safe. 'Lessen it jumps the creek."

Galen Kitridge, leaving Dad, dropped back beside the wagon once more. Zoe, when spoken to, said that Fernando was unconscious. That he had been delirious but that Dolorita had calmed him and he had dropped into a coma. Too, the young New Mexican was hot with fever.

"We can't help that now," Kitridge told his wife. "We've got to move."

Uncomplainingly, Zoe accepted the fact. Leaving the end gate of the wagon, Kitridge thrilled again to his wife's courage. Indeed, in all the group there was no panic, no fright. Things were as they were, and women and men accepted them.

When he reached his place again opposite the driver's seat, Kitridge saw that Dad Summers had changed course. The small line of hills was close now and against their flank there was a darker spot. Loy swung the leaders in the new direction.

"Trees, mebbe," he called from his seat, pointing with his whip.

"Maybe," Kitridge answered.

Evening came on, hastened by the lowering haze. The day waned and hills and fire drew closer. Horses and mules were panic stricken. It took strong hands on lines and reins to restrain them. Then, out of the smoke Dad Summers came loping back and when he saw Summers' bearded face Galen Kitridge felt quick relief.

"There's a creek ahead," Summers shouted. "Whip them mules, Bert. Pour the leather to 'em!" He swung back toward the south. On the driver's seat Bert Loy swung his long whip. The lash, flicking out, popped like a gunshot over the backs of the lead mules. The wagon lurched ahead.

The creek crossing was rough and dangerous. Summers had had no time to search for an easy place to go down the bank. The wagon went off a four-foot drop, Bert Loy urging the mules, keeping them in line, using all the art of the expert teamster. Into the creek the mules splashed and then across to climb the sloping south bank. Beyond the creek Loy pulled the heaving mules to a halt. Dad Summers, joining Galen Kitridge, looked

back toward the north. The fire line, licking at the dead brown grass, was not a quarter of a mile away.

"We beat it," Kitridge exulted.

"Yeah," Summers agreed, "but we'd ought to pull along up the hill. There ought to be a spring in them trees." He pointed to the small clump of cottonwoods on the slope.

"Pull up the hill, Loy," Kitridge directed.

WHILE they made their camp beside the cottonwoods and searched for the little spring within the grove, the men paused now and then to look back to the north. The fire had reached the creek and was racing along its bank, the flame leaping from clump to clump of the grass. It was a fascinating sight, and a terrifying one. Not until Zoe called to him from the wagon could Kitridge tear himself away.

"He's awake," she said quietly when her husband reached the end gate. "And he wants you."

Kitridge climbed into the wagon.

Fernando Miranda lay on the pallet that Zoe and Dolorita had made for him. His eyes were bright in the light from the candle lantern suspended from a wagon bow, and when Kitridge placed his hand on the injured man's forehead, he could feel that it was cool and moist. Fever was gone and Miranda was improved. Dolorita sat just beyond Miranda, at his head, and she looked questioningly at Kitridge. The major nodded encouragingly to the girl.

"What was it that you wanted, Miranda?" Kitridge questioned. "Are you feeling better now?"

Miranda's voice was as weak as his smile. "Better," he whispered. *"Señor,* have I told you? La Señorita says I have been out of my head."

"Told me what?"

"About McMurty."

"You told us that he shot you and that you'd quarreled."

"He means to steal the goods in his wagons," Miranda frowned with his concentration. "He said 'East.' He goes east, *Señor."*

"Don't you worry about that," Kitridge comforted. "We'll attend to McMurty. You just get some rest. That's your job."

Miranda smiled faintly and relaxed. Kitridge, backing out of the wagon, noted that Dolorita had placed her hand on the boy's own, and that Miranda's fingers had closed around it.

"What'd he want?" Dad demanded when Kitridge rejoined him.

"Wanted to make sure he'd told me about McMurty," the major answered. "McMurty plans to steal the stuff he's hauling. He bragged about it before he shot the boy. Miranda's worried."

"His daddy 'ud ruther have him alive than all the stuff in them wagons," Summers commented. "It's kind of a shame, though, to let McMurty get away with it. An' there's that deal you made, too."

"Do you think that McMurty will get through the fire?" Kitridge asked.

"Oh, sure." Dad Summers' answer was positive. "He'd see it comin' an' with all them men he's got, he'd backfire against it. He'll get through."

"Miranda said that McMurty was going east," Kitridge commented, glancing at his companion. "Back to Independence, do you think?"

SUMMERS shook his head and chewed meditatively on his tobacco. "Not to Independence," he answered. "There's two fawks to the trail, Majah. One comes out by Bent's Fort an' goes across Raton Pass. That's the trace we're follerin'. The other hits up the Dry Cimarron an' goes by Point of Rocks. McMurty mought mean to take that un. He'd hit back east along it. Somewheres back there he could peddle whut he's haulin', to some crooked trader."

"Can we strike that trail?"

"It's over the Ratons," Summers meditated. "Yeah. We could hit it. We'd go through a pass they call Trinchera. We're too far east to strike Bent's Fort now an' I reckon McMurty would want to dodge that, too. Likely he's headed for Trinchera Pass his own se'f."

"Do you think we're ahead of him?"

"We mought be," Dad admitted. "We mought not. I could scout an' see, but that's quite a scope of country back there, an' it's burned."

"We'll go on south then," Kitridge decided. "We'll cross the mountains and

strike that other trail. If we're ahead of McMurty we'll cut him off."

Summers looked curiously at the speaker. "Majah," he drawled, "McMurty's got quite a pod of men along. Supposin' you did cut him off, then whut?"

"I'll make him go to Santa Fé!" Kitridge rasped. "I'd intended to send Zoe and Dolorita on by stage. We can't do that now. So they'll go with us."

Dad Summers shook his head but did not voice a doubt. He had been through some desperate fights with this tall man who spoke so confidently. If Galen Kitridge said that McMurty was to be cut off and sent along to Santa Fé, then, so Dad thought, the chances were that McMurty would go to Santa Fé.

THE following morning the wagon went on, crossing the low hills, leaving them behind. And now, to the south, another line of hills marched, and angling southeast, Dad led toward them. That night they camped along a stream that came from the south and the next day reached the rocky pass that Dad Summers called Trinchera. Some day, in the not far-distant future, Charles Goodnight would drive cattle over this rocky way, taking them to Colorado grass and a northern market. Some day, and this lay far ahead, a railroad would split the mountains here. Galen Kitridge had no thought of those things as they toiled up the long slope, or, with the pass still above them, they made camp. Dad Summers' thoughts were concerned with grass and wood and water, those prime requisites for a camp site. Bert Loy thought of the welfare of his mules. Zoe Kitridge worried about her husband, and Dolorita Montes concerned herself with the welfare of Fernando Miranda, stronger now and demanding food. And Galen Kitridge thought grimly of McMurty and McMurty's wagons, and the things that had happened and that would happen, and, occasionally, cursed himself for a fool. But never did his resolution weaken. Galen Kitridge had given his word.

In the morning they went on again and, as the sun sloped down in mid-afternoon, they came down the last long slope of the pass. Galen Kitridge lifted his hand and the wagon halted and Dad came riding back, for there below them lay a camp, six covered wagons drawn into an oblong.

"There you are, Majah," Dad said cheerfully. "That's whut you been lookin' for."

Galen Kitridge peered beneath his shading hand, and shook his head.

"There's something wrong down there," he said slowly. "There are no fires and the oxen are not herded. Loy, you pull down slow. Dad and I will lope ahead and see."

He moved his horse forward, Summers beside him, riding at a slow lope toward the wagons.

As they neared the wagon corral a gaunt caricature of a man came crawling out over a wagon tongue and, straightening himself with an effort, holding his body erect by gripping the canvas cover of a wagon, stared toward them. Kitridge stopped his horse, as did Dad Summers, and the man who stood beside the wagons croaked words at them.

"Thank the Lord, you've come! Thank the Lord!"

"What's wrong here?" Kitridge demanded crisply. "What's happened to you?"

The scarecrow who clung to the canvas wagon sheet answered with one word: "Smallpox!"

VI

DAD SUMMERS grunted as though struck low, and Galen Kitridge, for an instant, recoiled. Then he rasped an order. "Go back and stop our wagon, Dad."

"You come with me," Summers grated. "You can't stay here, Majah."

"Are you the only one up?" Kitridge asked, disregarding Dad's words and staring at the lone man.

"The only one," the scarecrow croaked.

"Go on, Dad," Kitridge ordered. "I'm needed here." He swung down from his horse. For an instant Dad Summers paused as though undecided, then, with an oath, he turned his horse and at a run made for the slowly moving wagon.

Kitridge left his horse outside the corral. He helped the gaunt skeleton that still moved and talked over the wagon tongue and aiding the man began a slow circle

of the wagons. As he moved he asked questions and received slow answers.

The emigrant train had pulled into this sheltered cove when the smallpox struck them, some two weeks before. Every able-bodied man was down, as were the women. Some had died. The disease had run like wildfire among the wagons. They were helpless and out of food. Galen Kitridge was appalled at the conditions he found. Gaunt, emaciated men and women and children stared at him from their pallets. Some were in the wagons, some lay on beds outside. There were bodies in some of the beds, unburied and sending up a nauseating stench toward the sky. Kitridge, finishing his brief inspection, felt the sudden helplessness of a man who, confronted by a situation, can do nothing. Then he squared his shoulders.

"We got to have help," the man beside him whimpered. "We got to! For Lord's sake, don't leave us. We'll all die."

"I'll not leave you," Kitridge promised quietly.

"Majah!" Bert Loy's voice hailed from outside the circle of wagons.

"Go back, Loy!" Kitridge called quickly. "Don't come in."

For answer, Loy's sturdy body appeared, coming from between two wagons. He walked up, stopped, and smiled. "I've had it, Majah," Loy stated quietly. "I come to help. An' Miss Zoe's comin'. We tried to stop her but she wouldn't listen. She . . ."

"Where are you, Galen?" Zoe called, and then she, too, appeared between the wagons, and came running toward them. "I made Dad stay with Dolorita and Fernando," she said, stopping beside her husband. "Oh, Galen! The poor, pitiful things!" Her eyes encompassed the little square. "The poor things. What can we do for them?"

"Take care of them," Galen Kitridge answered strongly. "Take care of them the best way we can. Loy, you'll have to dig a grave. We'll bury the dead. Zoe, you stay here. I've got to talk with Dad."

Kitridge strode away toward the wagons. Bert Loy followed his departure with his eyes, and then walked over to where a spade lay beside a long-dead fire.

Outside the wagon park, Kitridge stopped. Dad Summers had halted the wagon some two hundred yards away and, still mounted, was riding warily toward the wagon park. He drew rein some fifty feet from Kitridge and bent forward in his saddle.

"You need me in there, Majah?" he asked.

Kitridge shook his head. There was a thrill of pride in him when he realized that at his word Dad Summers would have walked squarely into the danger that lurked in the wagon park. But he had other plans for Summers.

"No," Kitridge answered. "Not inside, Dad. I want you to get supplies from our wagon. Get all the food that you can. Bring it here and pile it where you are now. Bert and I will take it in from there. And we need wood for fires. You'll have to get that. Tell Dolorita what has happened. She'll have to look after Miranda. You'll help her, Dad. But you've got to get wood and food first. You'll have to hunt for us, too. We'll need meat."

"Yessir, Majah," Dad Summers answered sturdily.

"We're off the trail," Kitridge said. "It's up to us, Dad. It's our job."

Dad Summers straightened. "An' a tough one," he drawled. "Well, we've done tough jobs before this. Is Miss Zoe stayin', Majah?"

"She'll have to stay now," Galen Kitridge answered.

"I'll get the grub an' the wood," Dad promised, and turning his horse, rode back toward the single wagon. Kitridge watched him go and then turned and, stepping back across a wagon tongue, went to the task that awaited him.

THERE was little enough that he could do. He had no knowledge of smallpox, no way to cope with the disease. He did not realize that, in reality, his was a task of nursing, that those that lived were already recuperating from the disease and that those that were to die were already dead. He knew that food, and fire to cook it, was needed and that this wagon park was in a deplorable condition. So, soldier-like, he set about putting things to rights, bringing order out of chaos, burying the dead and caring for the living.

With Bert Loy, he dug a grave, a deep trench in the prairie outside the wagon

park. Then the dead were placed inside the grave and the earth thrown over them. There was no time for formality or mourning. By the time the burial was finished, Dad Summers had brought down food from the Kitridge wagon and had dragged a pile of wood from the hillside to a point close by the wagons. Loy and Kitridge brought this in. While they labored, Zoe had been busy. There was a spring not fifty yards from the wagons and she had carried water from the spring, filling a barrel. The gaunt skeleton who said his name was Smith had collapsed, leaving it all to newer, stronger hands. Zoe gave water to the sick, re-made tumbled beds, doing what she could in this short time. Now, while Bert Loy built a fire, she set about preparing food, making a great pot of soup in a big iron kettle that stood near a wagon. Galen came to her there.

"We've buried six," he said slowly. "There was one boy. . . . Zoe, you should not have come. You should have stayed with the wagon."

Zoe looked up and smiled. "A woman's needed here," she said briskly. "There are fourteen living."

Kitridge nodded gravely. "Fourteen," he agreed. "And we three to look after them."

Again Zoe glanced up from her busy hands. "If we only had some medicine," she said. "Galen, you must have Dad bring my little chest and the book. Remember when you laughed at me for buying it?"

Kitridge nodded. Indeed he did remember. Back in Independence, as they stocked the wagon, Zoe had insisted on buying Dr. Clerk's Book of Family Medicine, and Galen had laughingly chided her concerning her purchase. Now it appeared that the book would be invaluable. "I'll tell Dad," he promised.

"Majah!" Dad Summers was calling from beyond the wagons. Kitridge went to answer the call.

Summers had stopped some fifty feet from the enclosure. "I got all the grub except a little, down here," he said, "an' there's a pile of wood." He gestured to where he had stacked the firewood. "Whut else now, Majah?"

"The medicine chest and the doctor book," Kitridge answered.

"Yessir. An' anythin' else?"

"No. You'll have to hunt in the morning, Dad. Loy and I will look after things here. And get in more wood."

"Then I'll go back to the wagon," Dad said, and turned and took a step before he stopped once more.

"Majah," Summers' voice was serious, "we ain't reached that Point of Rocks trail yet. Whut about McMurty?"

"McMurty will go free, I guess," Kitridge answered wearily. "We can't leave here. Not now, Dad."

In silence Dad Summers stood considering Kitridge's words and then, still in silence, head bowed, he walked on toward the Kitridge wagon parked up the slope.

THE following morning Dad hunted. The fire had scattered the herd of buffalo, driving it east and north, but he was fortunate enough in finding three cows back in the hills. These he killed and loading meat from one of the animals on the spare horse he had with him brought it back to the camped wagons. There he found the meat welcome and, in talking with Kitridge, learned that the sick people of the train were doing well.

The treatment for smallpox is much nursing, care, nourishing food in small quantities, and some ointment to allay the incessant itching that comes after the pustules are formed. These things Galen Kitridge, his wife Zoe and Bert Loy dispensed. The three were busy, constantly moving, for they had fourteen invalids in their care. Most of these were men, but there were three women and four small children among the sick. Zoe, having studied the book that had caused amusement back in Independence, took the small quantity of carbolic acid her medicine chest contained, and mixing it with water, used it on the worst cases. The phenol checked the itching and those to whom it was applied were made more comfortable. The good, rich broth from buffalo meat and bones built up their strength.

One more of the train people—a child—died that day and Zoe wept softly as Kitridge and Loy dug the tiny grave. The others, growing stronger with food, were petulant and irascible and demanding. So that day passed.

The second day was a repetition of the

first: Work, cleaning the sick, bathing them, allaying the terrible itching, restraining the children who, with returning strength, would have scratched away the pustules and so infected themselves; feeding those too weak to hold a bowl of broth, cooking, keeping water supply and wood supply sufficient. These things filled the morning hours without a pause. Toward mid-afternoon there was a cessation of the work and at mid-afternoon there came on interruption and a fresh menace.

Kitridge was helping Zoe, while Bert Loy—outside the circle of the wagons—was conversing with Dad Summers. Dad had brought down a report of Fernando Miranda's progress from the Kitridge wagon and was retailing it with gusto. According to Dad Summers, Miranda and Dolorita Montes were falling in love. He knew the signs, Dad averred. Grinning, Bert Loy listened to Dad's summary and was about to make comment when, glancing up the hill, he stopped, his mouth open and his words unspoken. There, on the crest of the slope, was a solitary rider, a savage leaning forward, peering down the slope. The Indian turned and loped away out of sight, and Dad's yell brought Kitridge running from the wagons.

"Cheyennes!" Dad shouted, pointing. "Bert an' me saw the scout up on the hill. "What'll we do, Majah?"

Here was a quandary. Swiftly Kitridge considered it. Then he snapped orders. It was better to chance the uncertain perils of the smallpox than to take the certain peril of leaving the wagon entirely undefended.

"Get the wagon in, close to these," he ordered. "Bert, you catch the mules and bring the wagon down here. Dad, you try to get what loose stock you can gather, into the corral. Hurry!"

"But the smallpox!" Dad Summers blurted. "I'd ruther chance the Injuns than that!"

"You'll keep clear of the sick people," Kitridge snapped. "You've got my orders!"

For an instant more Dad hesitated, and then mounting, he rode away. Loy was already running up the slope toward the camped wagon. Kitridge turned to Zoe, who had joined him.

"I'll get as much water as I can," he said, and then: "Why didn't these people camp at the spring? Why didn't they?"

Zoe, without answering, caught up a pair of buckets and started toward the spring. Snatching up two more pails, Kitridge followed his wife.

FOR almost an hour they worked feverishly, carrying water and filling kegs, neglecting to answer the patients who called to them, striving desperately to make sure of the necessary water supply. Loy brought the Kitridge wagon down close to the others, stopped and backed it expertly into place so that the end was between two of the big canvas-covered prairie schooners. Kitridge gave crisp orders to the frightened Dolorita, bidding her stay in the wagon and to pile what boxes she could along the exposed end. Dad Summers came back driving six or seven oxen and put them into the corral with the mules and horses from the Kitridge wagon. And then, without warning, the ridge above was covered with riders, a long, thin line that came slowly down the slope.

"Cheyennes," Dad commented, studying the oncoming savages. "Here they are, Majah. Whut's the orders?"

"Wait!" Kitridge answered. "Perhaps they'll parley. No man fires until I give the word."

Behind the four, a sick man called petulantly, demanding water. Other voices arose in complaint or question. Then, as the word spread, these voices died away. Steadily down the slope the Cheyenne warriors came, some thirty of them.

"They ain't painted," Dad Summers murmured from the side of his bewhiskered lips. "This ain't a war party. They're huntin'. Not that that means a thing!"

Galen Kitridge gave no answer. Never had he seen such splendid men as those that rode slowly forward. Tall, straight, masters of themselves and of their mounts, they came on, all abreast. In the center was one, taller than the rest, sitting a piebald horse. Command sat upon him like an aura. Galen Kitridge did not take his eyes from that splendid savage figure. To Dad and Loy and Zoe, Kitridge spoke one word: "Wait!" and then, erect as a ramrod, head held high, he moved forward

and climbing over a wagon tongue, went out to meet the Cheyennes.

"Majah!" Dad Summers gasped warningly.

Galen Kitridge did not pause or look back.

VII

FORTY feet from the wagons the line of Cheyennes halted. Ten feet in front of the wagons Kitridge took his stand. The chief urged his horse a step forward and, hand half-lifted, spoke gutturally. Kitridge shook his head. "I don't understand," he said.

Now the chief's hands moved in swift conventional gestures that seemed to flow together and behind Kitridge Dad Summers grunted. This was the old sign language of the plains.

"He wants to know what we're doin' in this country," Summers muttered.

Galen Kitridge did not look back to the speaker. To the chief's left was a man, black bearded among all those clean-faced savages, his body clothed in buckskin, a skin turban wrapped about his head. At this man Kitridge pointed a long finger. "You speak English," he said, levelly. "Tell the chief that there are sick people here."

Surprise showed briefly in the black-bearded man's eyes. For an instant he hesitated and then, with guttural grunts, spoke one short sentence. The Cheyenne chief looked at the speaker and a slow frown came across his face as he rapped a sentence.

"He Sa-lo-tan." The bearded 'breed looked at Kitridge and jerked his head toward the chief. "This his country. You go."

Kitridge shook his head. "Sick people," he reminded. "I can't go."

Again the 'breed interpreter growled words. On Sa-lo-tan's face the frown deepened. He stared hostilely at Galen Kitridge, then, swiftly, his face changed expression. The scowl was gone and something very like apprehension showed in the jet-black eyes. Kitridge turned. He had heard movement behind him and now, as he looked, he saw its cause. Some of the people of the train, indomitable men, weak and sick as they were, had risen to the emergency. Three of them had come, dragging their rifles painfully after them. One man was heavily marked with pustules. The others, further progressed in the disease, had lost their scabs but red marks showed on their faces where the scabs had been. The men stood, swaying, supporting each other, confronting the Cheyennes.

At the end of the line of Indians one brave, a youth, gave a shrill frightened yowl and, whirling his horse, fled. Smallpox had ravaged the plains Indians on more than one occasion. They knew it for the evil thing it was. The panic spread. All that line of savage horsemen were affected. Before the menace of the plague, the Cheyennes fled. Smallpox had accomplished a thing that rifles could not have done.

Sa-lo-tan went with the rest, his horse swept up by the panic that possessed the others. But the chief did not go far. Regaining control of his mount, he turned and came riding back, and a moment later, in answer to Sa-lo-tan's shrill command, the bearded interpreter also swung his horse and followed the chief. This time Sa-lo-tan did not come close but stopping a good one hundred feet away spoke to the bearded man. The interpreter called across the space: "Sa-lo-tan says peace, white man."

"And I say peace." Kitridge strode forward. Apprehensively the Indian and the 'breed watched his coming, but they did not flee. Kitridge stopped. "We need help, Sa-lo-tan," he said, speaking to the chief, keeping his eyes on the Cheyenne. "I passed here and found these people sick and I must care for them. I want to send word for help to come to me."

The bearded 'breed rapped out guttural words. Sa-lon-tan looked steadily at Galen Kitridge, his face inscrutable, and answered.

"He say, are you chief?" the interpreter rasped.

Kitridge nodded. "Chief," he agreed pleasantly.

Again speech from the Cheyenne, the interpreter listening carefully. "He say, you not sick? You come take care these people?"

"I came to take care of them." Kitridge nodded.

ONCE more there was a brief parley between the interpreter and the Cheyenne, then the bearded man turned back to Kitridge. "Sa-lo-tan say you brave. More brave than him. He say you medicine man *and* chief."

"Will he take word for me and get help here?" Kitridge was eager as he waited for his question to be interpreted. The bearded man, turning, shook his head.

"He hunt. No take message."

Kitridge, disappointment showing on his face, turned from the Cheyenne and the 'breed, walking back toward the wagons.

"Hey!"

Kitridge stopped. The 'breed had his hand lifted.

"He say, you need meat?" The interpreter gestured toward Sa-lo-tan.

"Yes," Kitridge answered.

"We bring some here." The 'breed pointed to the ground at his horse's feet. "You get?"

"I'll get it," Kitridge assured, and walked on toward the wagons.

The Cheyennes retired up the slope. Kitridge expected them to go on, to disappear, but they did not. He could, as dusk grew, see fires winking along the slope and knew that the hunting party was camped. Kitridge discussed this phenomenon with Summers.

Dad did not understand it. "I *sabe* Comanches," he said. "I've lived with 'em an' if they was Comanches they'd of already lit a shuck outen here. These Cheyennes is different. I allus heard that they was brave people but I didn't think they'd have the guts to buck the smallpox. They'd of jumped us this evenin', Majah, if it hadn't been for them sick folks."

Kitridge nodded his agreement. "I think so, too."

"An' then," Dad mused, "for all his big talk, Sa-lon-tan knows that this ain't his country. This yere rightly belongs to the Utes or mebbe the Kiowas. He's a long ways from home an' he ain't too sure of his ground. Iffen the Utes catched him in here, there'd be a fight, you bet!"

There was a sound outside the square of wagons and both men arose. Someone called, and Summers grunted. "Damned if Sa-lo-tan didn't send down that meat he promised," the old scout commented, surprise in his voice. "I'll git it, Majah."

He disappeared into the darkness, his uncased rifle trailing.

Summers was gone a long time. Kitridge grew impatient and then alarmed. Finally the older man came back, carrying a chunk of meat. He dumped it down and grinned at Kitridge. "There's more out there," Summers said. "Sa-lo-tan sent us a whole half a cow buffalo. Me an' that 'breed had quite a talk. His name is LeBlanc. Comes from up Wyomin' way. He says they're a long way from home. They come down to meet the buffalo. They had a bad winter, he says, an' Sa-lo-tan just taken his foot in his hands an' pulled out. They got a camp not very far over the hill. It was the Utes that fired the grass, an' these Cheyennes ain't wantin' to meet the Utes."

Kitridge nodded. "Why didn't they go back to their camp?" he asked.

"LeBlanc didn't say. Sa-lo-tan's got somethin' up his sleeve. Somethin' I don't sabe. Wisht I knew what it was."

"Perhaps he's hiding from the Utes," Kitridge suggested.

"Mebbe that's it, but I don't think so. That Injun's smart, Majah. An' he sure thinks yo're a brave. He thinks yo're just the proper caper."

Oddly, Kitridge was pleased with the statement. "Why? he demanded.

"LeBlanc says that Sa-lo-tan's scared to death of smallpox. He thinks yo're braver than he is because you walked right into this an' took care of these folks. I talked quite a while with LeBlanc an' I didn't hurt you none. I tol' him all about the War an' how you fought in it, an' he'll tell Sa-lo-tan."

Kitridge got up. "I'll take a turn around the wagons." he said briefly. "No"—as Dad arose—"don't come with me. There's no need of you coming in contact with the sick. It's enough that Zoe and Loy and I do that."

"Then," Summers returned, "I'll slip over to the wagon an' see how Miranda's makin' out. Him an' Dolorita. I guess Loy fixed the little tent for her, didn't he?"

"Quite a while ago," Kitridge responded.

"Then," Summers said, "I'll just stay up an' keep an eye on things tonight. Them Cheyennes won't come around here—they're too scared of the smallpox. But

it won't hurt to keep a fire goin'. Good night, Majah."

"Good night," Kitridge replied.

IN the morning, through the gray light, Kitridge searched the hill slope with his eyes. There was now no sign of the Cheyennes, nothing to show that they had ever been present in the valley. Galen Kitridge sighed wearily and returned to his ever-present duties. The Cheyennes had been an interlude, a welcome break in the monotony of the task he had set himself. As he made his rounds, here inspecting a man who was well on the road to recovery, here stopping beside a woman whose face was marked with the smallpox pustules, it seemed to Kitridge that this was a thing he had always done and would always do. He could not, as he made his inspection, see much improvement in the sick people of the train. They were familiar to him now; he knew their names, their brief, uninteresting history. They were en route to California and had left the eastern country six weeks before. The smallpox had struck the train farther east and had run like wildfire through the wagons. They were, so it seemed to the major, ignorant and foolhardy, but they were brave. They had kept on traveling until they could no longer move. Bad habits, dirt, and lack of care had, of course, aided the ravages of the disease.

Coming back toward the fire where Loy was cooking breakfast, a meal that like all the other meals consisted of meat broth, with boiled meat for the stronger ones, and coffee made from Kitridge's meager supply, he saw the man Smith staring out through a gap between the wagons. Smith turned, and seeing the major, called to him and Kitridge went to the man.

"I been watchin' the path," Smith said as Kitridge came up. "There's somethin' movin' along it. It couldn't be another train, could it, Major?"

To these sick people, Galen Kitridge had become something of a demi-god and Zoe a goddess. Loy, they accepted just as they were now accepting Dad Summers. Smith looked at Kitridge hopefully.

"I don't believe so," Kitridge replied. "Probably it's the Cheyennes moving off."

"But it was comin' this way," Smith said. "Looked to me like the canvas top of a wagon. Lordy, Major, it 'ud shore be a help if some more folks come, wouldn't it?"

Kitridge nodded absently and turned to leave, when his eye, too, caught movement in the pass. He called to Dad Summers and, as the scout joined them, pointed to where he had seen the brief flash.

"There's wagons in the pass," Kitridge declared. "Look there, Dad."

Summers peered up the hill and then shook his head. "I don't think so," he began. "You seen a deer or . . ." The scout left his sentence unfinished. Distant and yet echoing through the hills, there came the sound of a shot. For an instant there was quiet and then clearly came the popping of rifles, fired irregularly. Kitridge and Summers stared at each other and Summers made a move as though he would leave.

"Rifles!" he snapped. "I'll go . . ."

"Wait here!" Kitridge ordered.

Dad Summers halted.

"There's a train coming down the pass," Kitridge said. "They have been jumped by the Cheyennes. That's why Sa-lo-tan waited!"

They could hear the fight clearly now, the sound of the rifles growing closer, faint whoops accompanying the fire. Then suddenly it was on them, the lead wagon of a train coming around the bend of the pass, the Cheyennes hanging on the flank like a lobo hangs to the flank of a wounded buffalo. More wagons appeared, coming down the slope, and Dad Summers caught at Kitridge's arm.

"McMurty!" he snapped.

There was no mistaking the identity of the train. Galen Kitridge had seen those wagons for too long a time to be in doubt. Dad Summers was right.

"We've got to help him," Kitridge declared. "Bert!"

"Yessuh, Majah?" Bert Loy was at Kitridge's elbow. Kitridge glanced back. Smith and three other men from the emigrant wagons were bunched behind him, one a giant of a man with the smallpox pustules still in evidence on his face and hairy, exposed chest.

"You get back to bed!" Kitridge ordered. "You can't come."

The big man rumbled deep in his throat. "The hell I can't!"

There was no time to argue. These men had rifles. There were, counting Kitridge, seven of them. And McMurty's train was out in the open now, the mules lunging at their collars, drivers shouting and trying to fight off the Cheyennes and drive at the same time. Here was a hopeless battle.

"To hell with him," Summers rasped. "Let him go an' git what's comin' to him. Damn his black heart!"

KITRIDGE did not heed the scout's pronouncement. He was already moving toward the oncoming wagons. Dad Summers, rasping an oath, ran to catch up with the major and Bert Loy. Behind the trio came the men from the emigrant wagons.

McMurty's men, sighting the corralled wagons, turned the direction of their flight, seeking safety with the camped train. The lead wagon swung toward the corral and with them the Cheyennes. Close by the spring Kitridge stopped his little army and they swung into line. The big Sharps of Kitridge and Loy and Summers roared in unison and the long squirrel rifles of the emigrants cracked spitefully. A Cheyenne tumbled from his horse and another, yelling in pain, swung out of the mêlée.

That brief interlude made the difference. It gave the lead driver clearance, and, mules running full out, his wagon swept past the men at the spring. Other wagons followed, some driverless, the mules keeping on, following the leaders unguided. Kitridge, as he slid a shell into the breech of his Sharps, caught a glimpse of McMurty's bearded, frightened face. Then he was peering over his sights of the rifle again and, clearly defined in them, caught Sa-lo-tan's body. The chief was looking squarely at Kitridge, and the major stayed his finger on the trigger. Savage that he was, Galen Kitridge could not but admire Sa-lo-tan.

In the next instant the Cheyenne was gone, out of Kitridge's vision. He swung to find another target, and beside him heard Dad grunt.

"They're drawin' off."

McMurty's wagons had reached the corral now, were stopping, those drivers that remained, pulling in their mules, dropping from the wagons and seeking sanctuary among the wagons that were parked. The loose mules and those that were abandoned made a hopeless tangle outside the corral. All this Kitridge saw in one fleeting glance, then, as he turned, he saw that the Cheyennes had withdrawn up the slope and that Sa-lo-tan, arm unlifted, hands palm forward and with LeBlanc beside him, was riding forward.

"That's the peace sign," Summers growled. "Now whut's he up to? Don't trust him, Majah."

Kitridge stepped forward from his little line of men and Sa-lo-tan and LeBlanc stopped their horses. The Cheyenne spoke and LeBlanc interpreted.

"He say," LeBlanc jerked his head toward Sa-lo-tan, "he not know these your wagons an' men. He want make talk with you."

Kitridge walked forward despite Summers' warning. On Sa-lo-tan's face a grim smile appeared.

"You, Bert," Dad Summers growled, "keep yore sights lined on that LeBlanc. I'll take care of the Injun."

When he reached the two men, Kitridge stopped. Sa-lo-tan, dismounting, stood tall and proud, facing him. LeBlanc climbed down from his horse.

"He say"—again the interpreter jerked his head toward the Indian—"you brave. You friend. He say you make treaty, huh?"

"I'll make a treaty with him," Kitridge answered.

There was more talk between LeBlanc and the Cheyenne. Then, turning to Kitridge, LeBlanc said: "Yore wagons?"

"My wagons," Kitridge agreed, and nodded so that Sa-lo-tan would understand.

"Yore wagons, all right," LeBlanc said. "Sa-lo-tan not fight yore wagons. He did not know. Now he say all right."

Kitridge smiled and held out his hand. For an instant the Cheyenne hesitated. He was, Kitridge knew, afraid of the smallpox. Then, overcoming his fear, the Cheyenne took that extended hand and shook it briefly. Following that gesture the chief spoke again to LeBlanc and LeBlanc relayed the words to Kitridge.

"Sa-lo-tan say you friends. He say suppose Ute come fight him: you help?"

"Tell him I'll come," Kitridge promised.

"Good!" LeBlanc stated, and Sa-lo-tan apparently understanding the words, grunted approval.

For an instant the two men, Cheyenne and white, stood facing each other, then suddenly both smiled. This time it was the Cheyenne who held out his hand, and Galen Kitridge that took it.

VIII

BACK inside the circle of wagons Galen Kitridge met McMurty. The wagon master was untouched, more fortunate than some of his men. Several of the train had been wounded and now those that were not injured were attending to their fellows. Confronting McMurty, Galen Kitridge looked slowly up and down the wagon master's great bulk, finishing his inspection by looking squarely into McMurty's eyes.

McMurty could not meet that direct gaze and turned his eyes away.

"Well?" Kitridge rasped.

There was an accounting due between himself and this bearded man. Kitridge was ready for it.

"Didn't hardly think I'd find you here," McMurty announced, striving for nonchalance.

"No. I suppose not."

"Kind of lucky." McMurty glanced at Kitridge again, unable to read the major's face. "They jumped us up this side of the top. Kind of made it bad. I've lost three teamsters an' I don't know what's happened to my spare stock."

Still Kitridge said nothing. McMurty glanced at him again. "We seen these wagons an' made for 'em. Guess the Injuns figgered they couldn't take us when we got forted up. We'd already give 'em a bellyful."

The man was boasting.

"Iffen it hadn't been for us, yore hair would be on Cheyenne belts right now," Dad Summers rasped. He had come up to stand beside Kitridge. "Damn you, McMurty. . . ."

"Dad!"

Kitridge's voice was quiet, but Summers heeded it and was silent.

McMurty shrugged. "Guess we owe you some thanks at that," he said. "I done wrong when I wouldn't let you tie up with my wagons, Kitridge. I'm frank to admit it."

"I think that you've done a number of things that were wrong, McMurty." There was cold iron in Kitridge's voice. McMurty made no answer.

Zoe was standing beside the bed of an emigrant woman, not fifteen feet distant. To the left of the wagon master Kitridge's wagon stood, and at its end Dolorita Montes looked out on the scene. Loy had gone to stand beside Zoe, and the emigrant people, those that could, were sitting up in their beds. The four men of the wagon train who had followed Kitridge were back of him, staring at the wagon master, while behind McMurty his own men made a compact little group.

McMurty, after a moment's silence, turned to the waiting men. "What you lookin' at?" he rasped. "Git out of them wagons. Git straightened out! What you waitin' for? We got to get along!"

"You're not going on, McMurty," Kitridge said quietly. "You're going to stay right here!"

McMurty wheeled. "Stay?" he demanded. "I'm haulin' freight. I ain't stayin'."

At the end of the Kitridge wagon Fernando Miranda's face appeared. Dolorita was holding to the young man, supporting him. Miranda was pallid and his eyes were bright, sparkling with his anger.

"No," Kitridge said. "You're staying, McMurty. You and your men. You'll not get away!"

"Why, damn you!" McMurty rasped. "You think because you shot at a few Injuns, you can tell me what to do? I'm goin' on, that's what I'm doin', an' you nor nobody else can stop me!"

Kitridge made a little gesture with his hand. "These people are sick," he said. "They need your help and they need some of the supplies you have in your wagons. You'll stay and help them and give them those supplies. It's smallpox here, McMurty. You'll stay and help to fight it."

"Damned if I will!" Behind McMurty his men shifted. In the excitement of the fight and their escape they had failed to note closely the people about them. Now, as they looked, as they saw the sick, a murmur ran through their ranks. "Smallpox!"

"LET'S get out of here, boys!" McMurty rasped. "Let's go!"

His men moved to obey. McMurty took a step.

"McMurty!"

The wagon master stopped. Kitridge was staring at him steadily. "You'll not leave, I tell you. You'll stay and help. And then you'll account to me for shooting Fernando Miranda and for trying to steal Miranda's goods."

"To hell with you!" McMurty rasped. "You can't stop me. Git on, boys! Git out of here!"

"And take chances with the Cheyennes?" Kitridge rapped.

Behind McMurty his men stopped. They had forgotten the Indians.

"Damn you!" McMurty flared. "You've stopped me all along, you an' that whelp in the wagon. You can't stop me now!"

His big hand shot up to the pistol that rode at his hip, snatched out the weapon and brought it level. There were other guns drawn. Weapons appeared in the hands of teamsters. Dad Summers, his Sharps lifted, stepped swiftly away from Kitridge's side. Bert Loy grabbed for his gun. McMurty fired and the ball tugged at Galen Kitridge's shoulder, cutting the cloth of his shirt, breaking his skin.

McMurty jerked at his weapon, cocking it, his eyes mad with his rage.

It was then that Galen Kitridge drew his weapon. Dad Summers' Sharps was swinging to cover the crazed wagon master and Bert Loy was shifting to clear Zoe who ran toward her husband. The hammer of McMurty's gun was cocked beneath his thumb and his mouth was open, roaring formless curses, as he lurched his big body forward. Then Galen Kitridge shot, coolly, deliberately. Once and then twice the Navy Colt in his hand barked its message, smoke mushrooming from its muzzle. Through that smoke Galen Kitridge saw McMurty check in his wild leap, saw him stagger and then, slowly it seemed, come down, felled like some tree beneath a woodsman's ax. Behind Kitridge, Dad Summers' sharp warning.

"Stop it! Drop them guns! You want what yore boss got?"

There was a moment of indecision when it was touch and go. The wagon men, excited, angry, might in that instant have fought. Then they calmed and one long-bodied teamster, setting the butt of his rifle on the ground, drawled the words that ended it all.

"Hell! Mac asked for it. An' got it!"

Beside a wagon a sick man on a pallet, half lifted himself and called: "Them Injuns are comin' back!" He had seen through the wheels beside him, the movement of the Cheyennes.

Men ran to posts, to positions of advantage about the wagons, and Galen Kitridge, leaving Zoe, who had come to him, moved hurriedly to a gap between the wagons.

But Sa-lo-tan had not broken the truce. The Cheyennes came on down the slope and stopped, and their chief and LeBlanc rode forward. Kitridge stepped out and LeBlanc called: "We hear guns. You got trouble?"

"No trouble," Kitridge called in answer.

LeBlanc spoke to Sa-lo-tan and then, turning to Kitridge again: "All right then. Sa-lo-tan say you got trouble, he help."

Within the wagon circle the men of McMurty's train looked at each other. They knew, now, what might have happened had McMurty won, or had they taken up his quarrel.

"Thanks," Kitridge called. "I'm all right. I don't need help."

Again the brief exchange between Sa-lo-tan and LeBlanc and then the interpreter grinned all across his bearded face. "We go now," he said. "Get teepee. Get squaw. Sa-lo-tan come live by his friend." Interpreter and chief rode back toward the waiting braves.

Kitridge strode back to the wagons. When he entered the enclosure the men, his own, McMurty's and those of the emigrants that were able, grouped about him, each forming a little compact knot. Their eyes were questioning and Kitridge knew that they were waiting for orders. The weight of responsibility descended on his shoulders and his voice was weary as he spoke.

"Get your camp made," he said to McMurty's men. "Not too close. "We've still got smallpox here. We need help and some supplies, but there's no need of your exposing yourselves." An instant more he stood and then turned, and as he walked

away McMurty's teamsters moved to obey his order.

SA-lo-tan was as good as his word. Before evening, the Cheyenne teepees were set in an irregular line along the pass, well away from the camped trains. McMurty's men, too, brought order from the chaos of their tangled mules and wagons. They, too, made camp, holding their wagons apart from the emigrant train. Some of their number—those who had already had smallpox and so were immune came to the emigrant wagons and offered their help.

That night, for the first time since he had crossed Trinchera Pass, Galen Kitridge slept, deep and peaceful, while in the pass the little fires of the Cheyennes twinkled. At the freighter train, men stood guard, not trusting their neighbors, and strong, fresh hands cared for those sick who needed attention. And that night, too, the stars shown down on the earth of a newly turned grave where Webb McMurty, all his trickery and treachery over now, slept with his fathers.

FOR a week the Cheyennes camped in the pass. Daily there were exchanges between the savages and the whites. Then, one morning, the teepees were gone and Dad Summers, joining Galen Kitridge in his morning inspection, drawled slow words of explanation. "The buffalo have gone on north. I reckon Sa-lo-tan follered them."

Kitridge looking up the slope to where the teepees had stood, nodded wordlessly. Within him was a faint regret. The Cheyennes were gone and somehow Galen Kitridge was lonely.

Another week went by and part of another. Men and women moved now about the emigrant wagons. Some were weak, and some, fully recovered, were strong; but all looked to Galen Kitridge for leadership. Fernando Miranda, recovering from his wound, sat daily in the sun and it was noticeable that, ever close to the young New Mexican, Dolorita Montes had a place. They talked together in soft Spanish, and Zoe, the light of the true matchmaker in her eyes, spoke of this to her husband. They made a fine pair.

Galen smiled and nodded, for it seemed to him, as to Zoe, that when Pasqual Miranda's goods reached Santa Fe, the good Don might find that he had acquired a daughter-in-law.

And so the days went by and the spring drew close to summer. The oxen of the emigrants were fat, and the mules of the freight outfit were plump and full. There was no more smallpox. Despite their exposure, neither Zoe nor Kitridge nor Dad Summers contracted the disease and there was no outbreak among the drivers of the freight wagons. And, as the days passed, Galen Kitridge became more and more the leader of them all. There was no formal election as was sometimes held among the westbound trains, but McMurty's men, hard cases that they were, grew to look to the tall young major for direction. As for the emigrants, they worshiped him.

And then one night there was consultation about the big fire of the emigrant train. The next morning there was a flurry of activity as oxen were driven in and yoked, as men caught mule teams, harnessed them and hooked them to their wagons. Presently all was in order. At the head of the line was Galen Kitridge's wagon, Loy upon the seat, Zoe beside him, and inside young Fernando Miranda and Dolorita Montes. Behind them came the wagons and trailers of the freighters, and beyond these the ox drawn prairie schooners of the emigrants. They were pointed west along the trail, pointed west for Santa Fe. At the head of the train Kitridge sat his horse and Dad Summers, loping up, gave his report.

"All ready, Majah."

Then Kitridge looked once again and for the last time at the hills of the pass and at the trampled ring where the wagons had parked, and at the brown earth of the graves. His arm went up and the wheels began to turn as drivers applied gad and whip and voice, and all down the long line the major's voice rang as he gave his command.

"Stretch out!"

Beside Bert Loy, Zoe's voice was soft as she echoed that word: "Stretch out! Stretch out for Santa Fe."

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THE EDITOR.

Saved by a Sunbonnet

BY DAISY NEWCOMB

OLD STELL racked along grandly, for although she was old she was still the best saddle horse on the farm. Child that I was, I liked to ride in style to town. It was hot and I had no saddle but I enjoyed the trip each time, for I got to bring the mail and the groceries for ourselves and the neighbors. Often, that was not easy, either. I had to bring such things as tobacco, sugar and fence-staples in the same flour sack with the mail . . . and if they got together—oh, what a mess! That's what happened to me the time the gray wolves chased me—but that's another story. This one's about the time my white sunbonnet saved me.

It happened this way:

Mama had called me to the house and told me that I must go into town and get some sugar so that she could bake for papa's birthday. As Old Stell was standing in the barn, to get away from the flies, I sneaked up and slammed the door and caught her. I was so happy riding along. When I got to town there were more men on horseback in the little town of Waukomis, Oklahoma, than I had ever seen there before. They seemed to be out in front of Jonas Davis' real estate office and Val Johnson was talking to them in his loud, authoritative voice as if giving them instructions. I could not get close enough to hear what he said but mama had told me to get the sugar and the mail and to hurry right back, for the Longs were coming in the morning to celebrate as Mr. Long and papa had been born on the same day.

When I came out of the store with the mail and the sugar, Val Johnson came up

to me on his horse and said: "What you doin' in town—ain't you afraid Zip Wyatt will git Old Stell?"

"Who's Zip Wyatt?" I asked innocently as he got off his horse to help me up with the sack of stuff.

"Why he's the outlaw the posse's gettin' ready to run down and he's headed right fur your pa's farm. You better stay behind until they chase him down," he warned.

"Me? Well, I guess not. Do you think I am going to let a fellow like that get any of our horses? Mama is alone and she is scared to death. I'm not afraid of outlaws. . . . I went to school with the Dalton Gang down in Kingfisher County before the strip opened. They can't catch Old Stell anyway." And away I galloped.

Paul Revere could not have ridden with more pride than did I as I distributed the mail all the way out. I passed the neighbor's house and told them of the outlaw. Once as I rode cross-lots not far from a creek bank a horse whinnied and Stell answered. I put her to a keen run, sure that the outlaw was hidden in that bank. Mama and I drove the horses into the barn and got the gun ready and I took Old Stell right down in front of our dug-out door. But papa and my brothers soon came and they laughed and said that Val Johnson was just scaring me.

The next day, though, they found out differently. The man was still at large, with a posse after him. Some time the day before he had passed nearby. He had made old lady Copple feed him and his horse—but the Copples had no horses of their own so the outlaw had gone on to the home of John Daily, an old bachelor. John had just fed his pony and was returning to the house when he saw a man carrying a Winchester coming toward him. The fellow looked tired and worn and his brown shirt was covered with blood stains. He told Daily that he was Dick Yeager and that his partner had been killed. He commanded Daily to get his ponies and come with him. He wanted a saddle and Daily told him that Jake Mangold had a "turtle-shell" but Yeager said he had rather ride bareback. The outlaw forced Daily to go with him until he got another horse. He asked Daily not to give him away too soon so that he would have a chance to get away.

Posses from all around had formed and he got to Sheridan on the strip line but was so tired he went into a cornfield to rest.

He was captured there in the cornfield, being shot twice by the two men who came upon him asleep. He was given first aid by Doctors Love and Jones who resided near and was then taken to the Enid jail. There, he told of having seen a little girl with a white sunbonnet. He said that he could have escaped if he could have gotten the fine horse she was riding but that life was not worth harming a little girl. He had a little girl of his own, he told his captors.

My father thought that it was right for us to go to the jail and thank him. "It was her white sunbonnet," he said. "I would have shot a man or a boy but a little girl I could not shoot."

This was the only bit of softness he showed in the month that he lay in that terrible little jail. He died without telling on any of his pals or making any confessions whatsoever, so I think it is only true for me to say that I was saved by my white sunbonnet.

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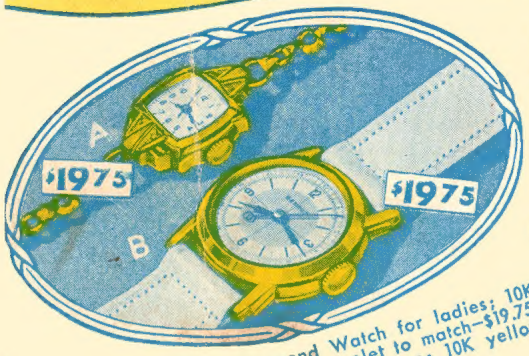

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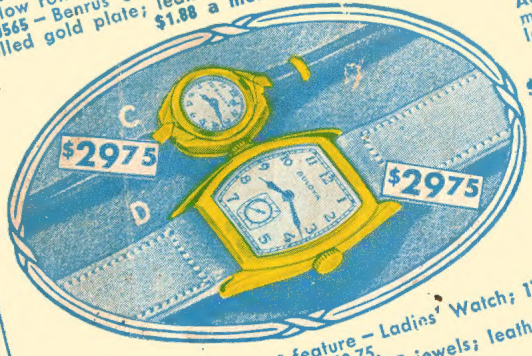

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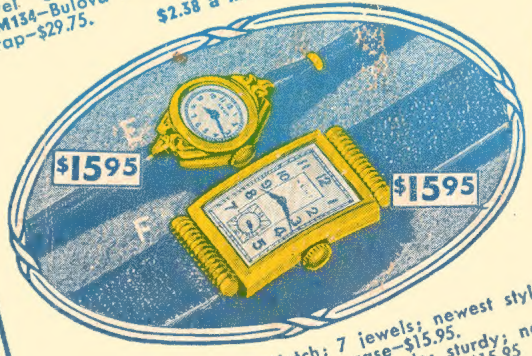

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